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Intersections of Theatre Theories of Spectatorship with Musical Theatre Practices in Performance and Production

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INTERSECTIONS OF THEATRE THEORIES OF SPECTATORSHIP WITH MUSICAL
THEATRE PRACTICES IN PERFORMANCE AND PRODUCTION

by

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B.A., University of Colorado, 1980

A thesis submitted to the
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find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
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Intersections of Theatre Theories of Spectatorship with Musical Theatre Practices in
Performance and Production

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Bud Coleman

As a genre, musical theatre has been left out of the discussion in many scholarly and seminal works in the area of spectator and audience reception theory studies. This paper integrates spectator theory with musical theatre performance to consider the “in the moment” experience of musical theatre as a live event in which the spectator actively participates. Recent work in audience/spectator theory reflects a growing interest in the active role of the spectator in the moment of performance and the relationship between the spectator and actor. This paper reviews models which describe the actor-spectator relationship from theatre theories of semiotics, phenomenology, cognitive approaches to spectating, and the study of the theatrical event and adapts them to create a new model of theatrical communication between the actor and spectator for a musical theatre performance which utilizes these key modes: SENSORY, ARTISTIC, WE, PERFORMATIVE, and CELEBRITY. This new model is used to analyze the actor-spectator relationship during actual musical theatre performances. It is first applied to an historical musical theatre performance event: the 1943 Boston out-of-town tryout of the musical *Oklahoma!* Next it is applied to performances of two musicals from the 2011-2012 Broadway Season: *The Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess* and the revival of *Godspell*. Throughout these analyses we remain situated within the frame of performance and avoid focusing on the larger perspective of the “cultural frame” of theatre, which has been discussed by other scholars. Each analysis takes a fresh look at viewing musical theatre through the frame of the active and

frequently changing actor-spectator relationship with the goal of examining what is going on between the stage and spectator that packs such a punch in the moment of the experience.

Phenomenologists call these visceral moments.

Like other live performances, musicals need an audience. As an “event,” a musical theatre performance is mutually created by the shared agency of the actor and spectator. This paper discusses how a multiplicity of blends and relationships between the actor and spectator enhances their mutual work in the “event” of the performance and contributes to a memorable and rich musical theatre experience.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As a genre, musical theatre has been left out of the discussion in many scholarly and seminal works in the area of theatre performance and audience reception theory studies. Why? Is it because musical theatre is not considered to be part of the “legitimate” theatre, as it is too embedded in the commercialized theater world? Is it considered only a “culinary” form of entertainment and not worthy of discussion? Could it be that as a genre it lacks the voice of a theorist to elevate its practices and concerns into the scholarly world of discourse? Is it due to the difficulty of studying musical theatre outside of the actual experience of it since the performance includes a multiplicity of “texts” in libretto, music, lyrics, choreography and staging? Although the form and content of musical theatre are widely discussed, I believe that audience reception theorists have missed the opportunity to relate this performance driven genre to interesting concepts in audience and performance reception theory. Susan Bennett’s *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (1997) attempts to bridge the gap between critical theory, reception theory and theatre practices, but doesn’t include musical theatre performances in its case studies or applications to theatre texts/performance. Bruce McConachie’s recent *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre* (2008) illustrates its many interesting points with examples from five (non-musical theatre) plays: *Oedipus the King*, *Twelfth Night*, *Uncle Vanya*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Top Girls*

which McConachie claims offer “lots of dramaturgical, theatrical and contextual variety” (16) and which engage a variety of spectators, however, the lack of an illustrating choice from the genre of musical theatre is disappointing. Other scholars, such as Jill Dolan who applies critical theory to sample theatre productions in her books *The Feminist Spectator* (1991) and *Utopia in Performance* (2005), leave musical theatre productions and performances out of the discussion. This is not to suggest, however, that scholarly work about musical theatre has been completely mute. Raymond Knapp’s two excellent contributions, *The American Musical and Formation of National Identity* (2005) and *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (2006) raise new insights about the historical and cultural relevance of musical theatre. This paper will utilize spectator theory with musical theatre performance in considering the “in the moment” experience of musical theatre as a live event in which the spectator actively participates. My analysis will engage current discourse regarding audience/spectator theory, particularly focusing in the area of the actor-spectator relationship.

Other scholars have noted the lack of interest in musical theatre as a critical subject. In the introduction to *Women in American Musical Theatre* (2008), editors Bud Coleman and Judith A. Sebesta comment, “This scholarly bias for spoken-word theatre is ironic given that audiences prefer musical theatre. During the twentieth century, eight-six productions had a Broadway run of over 1000 performances; only twenty-six of them were non-musicals” (3). Audience reception theorist, Susan Bennett, concurs that, “historians and critics of contemporary performance have steered a course that veers away from analysis of the dramatic productions most theatergoers choose to see” (2005:408). Foster Hirsch, Professor of Film at Brooklyn College and biographer of musical theatre showman Harold Prince, adds another element which explains why musical theatre is often left out, “Because of their popularity, and because inherent

in the genre is the desire to please a wide audience, musicals have been critical stepchildren, often looked at as a plebeian, ephemeral, unliterary kind of performance theatre that defies serious analysis” (Hirsch 5). Until recently most books on musical theatre have been of the anecdotal or coffee table variety. Within the last twenty years, however, outside of audience reception studies there has been a growing body of scholarly work on musical theatre. These works can be classified by type. The first is the almost encyclopedia style work which includes detailed show by show facts about productions, performers, length of run, national tours, song changes, etc. These include works by Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle* (1978 reprinted 2001), Richard Norton, *A Chronology of American Musical Theater* (2002), *Broadway Musicals, 1943-2004*, by John Stewart (2006), and the aptly titled *Broadway Musicals Show By Show*, by Stanley Green (2008 6th ed). Some studies feature a comprehensive look at just one show such as Tim Carter’s *Oklahoma! The Making of an American Musical* (2007), Bruce D. McClung’s *Lady in the Dark* (2006), and Tim Chapin’s *Everything Was Possible: The Birth of the Musical Follies* (2003). Some explore musical theatre by subgenre such as *Women in American Musical Theatre* (2008), edited by Bud Coleman and Judith A. Sebesta, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (2004) by Andrea Most, *The Megamusical* (2006), by Jessica Sternfeld, and *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (2011), by Stacy Wolf. Other studies focus on the artists who make musical theatre whether they are composers, lyricists/writers or directors/choreographers such as *The Art of the American Musical Conversations with the Creators* (2008), edited by Jackson R. Bryer and Richard A. Davison, *A Chorus Line and the Musicals of Michael Bennett* (1989), by Ken Mandelbaum, *The Sound of Their Music: The Story of Rodgers & Hammerstein* (2002), by Frederick W. Nolan, *Directors and the New Musical Drama* (2008), by Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen, and *Harold*

Prince and the American Musical Theatre (1989, expanded edition 2005) by Foster Hirsch.

One of the most prolific areas for writing is in the field of the social context and cultural relevance of the American musical. This field considers the musical as a cultural artifact and explores ideas and themes in musicals that both reflect and shape American culture. Works in this area include: *Strike Up the Band: A New History of Musical Theatre* (2006), by Scott Miller, *Musical Theatre and American Culture* (2003), by David Walsh and Len Platt, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (2003), by John Bush Jones, *The Musical as Unfinished Business* (2005), by Bruce Kirle, and the two books already mentioned by Richard Knapp. Finally, another topic of interrogation is the conventions and form of musical theatre, which often focuses on how these have changed or adapted historically.

These interesting works include *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical* (2005), by Mark Grant, *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (2010), by Larry Stempel, *The Musical as Drama* (2006), by Scott McMillen, and the seminal work, *The American Musical Theater: A Consideration* (1967, 1976) by Lehman Engel. This list does not claim to be exhaustive in citing all the recent literature on musical theater, but it is intended to suggest in what areas current scholarly work is located. None of these works explores the relationship of musical theatre to the spectator *within* a performance/event context other than to suggest how critical it is to “try-out” new musicals in front of live audiences. Scott McMillen, in *The Musical as Drama* approaches a “moment to moment” discussion of the song “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top” to illustrate his concept of “book time/number time” in musicals, but his “text” is not a performance, it is the lyrics from the libretto and his approach does not try to contextualize this song within a live performance/event. Bruce Kirle’s, *Unfinished Show Business*, begins promisingly with the intent to discuss musicals as works in progress, but ultimately the bulk of

his work references the cultural and historical contextualizing of musical theatre, and is not an examination of the relationship between the audience and the stage in the context of a performance.

Recent work in audience/spectator studies, however, does reflect a growing interest in the active role of the spectator in the moment of performance and the relationship between spectator and actor in a live event. It is beyond the scope of this work to attempt a history of audience/spectator research and theories, but I will put in context here some of the theorists and theories which we will look at more closely in subsequent parts of this paper.

It may be helpful to first provide a useful definition. Reception theory, as defined by Robert C. Holub, author of *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (1984), “refers to a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and the reader” (xii). Reception and the similar “reader-response theory”¹ grew out of literary criticism and includes the theories of Hans Robert Jauss (*horizon of expectations*), Wolfgang Iser (*filling in the gap*), and Stanley Fish (*interpretive communities*). Although initially useful in theatre criticism, the limitations of these theories for live theatre performances became apparent. In *Theatre Audiences*, Bennett cites the problem of using concepts and theoretical models which were originally generated in response to the activity of reading or watching film: “The usefulness of a discourse which took account of receptive processes was undercut by its neglect of the dramatic text and performance. [. . .] The literary, as well as the filmic, text is a fixed and finished product which cannot be directly affected by its audiences” (20). Theatre reception theories of the later 20th century try to theorize the potential reciprocity between the auditorium and the stage and how audiences

¹ Although not critical to our purposes, Holub makes the distinction that Reader-response theory grew under no apparently organized banner whereas Reception theory is a “cohesive, conscious and collective undertaking” (Holub xiii.). See the “Preface” in Holub’s *Reception Theory* for a more complete delineation.

understand live theatre. These theories delve into the ontological and epistemological nature of theatre. Although initially concerned with the production of meaning, theatre theories have more recently attempted to describe the reception process, the actor-spectator relationship, and the nature of viewing. One of these, the semiotic approach, views theatre as a sign system to be interpreted by the spectator, and according to Bennett:

[It] emerged in the 1970s as an attack on the text-centred criticism of traditional dramatic writing, and the predominant concern early on was the relationship between the dramatic text and the *mise en scene*. [. . .] More recently, however, as the objectives of semiotic study have been redefined, the spectator has increasingly become an important focus. [. . .] Primarily, semioticians have explored the density of signs evident in any performance, the interrelationship of those signs, and, in particular, the Western tradition of concentration on the signs that emanate from the actor. (Bennett 1997: 68, 69)

In *Understanding Theatre: Performance Analysis in Theory and Practice* (1995) theatre scholar, Willmar Sauter, credits semiotics with instigating the importance of theory in theatre studies (Martin and Sauter, 24), but in the 1980s the hegemony of semiotics in theatre theory was challenged by the theories of phenomenology which reclaimed the materiality of theater and proposed the concept that meaning could be found in the experience of a *lived* body and not through the mediation of signs. In *Theatre and Audience* (2008), Helen Freshwater discusses how theorists built upon the groundbreaking work, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), by Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

[His work] reminds us that our entire experience of the world is embodied and that this embodiment frames our every perception and thought. His insights arrived as a common point of reference in theatre and performance studies in the 1980s and 1990s, and they have been used to frame and legitimize scholarly discussion of corporeal responses: the “gut reactions” that are integral to the experience of theatre-going. (19)

In *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre* (1985), scholar Bert O. States asserts that both phenomenology and semiotics can co-exist as compatibly useful *tools* for

understanding theatre, however he notes the phenomenological departure from semiotic theory in this way:

The power of the image (or sign) is not necessarily exhausted either by its illusionary or its referential character. [. . .] Putting semiotics aside, we tend generally to undervalue the elementary fact that theater – unlike fiction, painting, sculpture, and film – is really a language whose words consist to an unusual degree of things that *are* what they seem to be. In theater, image and object, pretense and pretender, sign-vehicle and content, draw unusually close. [. . .] Put bluntly, in theater there is always a possibility that an act of sexual congress between two so-called signs will produce a real pregnancy. (20)

In considering the relationship of the spectator to the actor, editors Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach in *Critical Theory and Performance* (2007), quote from Stan Garner's work *Bodied Spaces* (1994):

From the phenomenological point of view, the living body capable of returning the spectator's gaze represents a methodological dilemma for any theoretical model - like "semiotics" - that offers to describe performance in objective terms. Alone among the elements that constitute the stage's semiotic field, the body is a sign that looks back. (Garner qtd. in Reinelt 10)

Within the last ten years there has emerged an interest in connecting how spectators understand theatre through the cognitive processes of the embodied *mind*. In *Performance and Cognition: Theatre Studies and the Cognitive Turn* (2006), F. Elizabeth Hart suggests, "it is becoming increasingly clear that Merleau-Ponty's embodied consciousness is a cannily accurate description of what the scientists now see as the material grounding of knowledge, of the mind-brain's dependence on the body's concrete situatedness within the physical and social worlds that encompass it" (32). Developing this concept further, Bruce McConachie's book *Engaging Audiences* considers how the embodied mind of the engaged theatre spectator processes theatre reception on three levels of cognition: the "species," "social" and "cultural" levels. He challenges theories of theatre which he considers to be scientifically "unfalsifiable," such as Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Saussurean semiotics, and Derridean deconstructions

(McConachie 2008:11). According to McConachie cognitive processes of spectating also suggest a level of universality in cognition:

[C]ognitive structures of the mind/brain place limits on the extent to which society and history can shape individuals and cultures. Because humans walk upright and because many of the operations of our minds embody our physical orientation in the world, people in all cultures carry a concept of “verticality” in their heads. This mental concept, like many others, is universal, even though its particular expression varies across cultures. (2008:4)

The cognitive approach to spectating considers new ways of looking at how a spectator participates actively through processes of attention, memory, visual perception, conceptual blending and the imaginative concept of play, and the spectator’s relationship to the actor through the double consciousness of theatre (McConachie 2008:23).

The concept of theatrical play also figures into the theories of Willmar Sauter who approaches audience understanding through the lense of communication within the “theatrical event.” In the 1990s, Sauter and other theatre theorists including Peter Eversmann, changed their emphasis from audience research studies to the study of the “event-ness” of theatre. This is described in the book *Theatrical Events: Borders, Dynamics, Frames* (2004) which came out of their research together in the IFTR/FIRT Working Group “Theatrical Event: Production, Reception, Audience Participation and their Interrelationships” (1). In his book *The Theatrical Event* (2000) Sauter claims that focusing on the “theatrical event” represents a paradigmatic change of concept in theoretical approaches to understanding performance particularly for the theatre historian. Sauter writes, “Looking back at historical writings on theatre, it becomes obvious that the difference mainly concerns the status of the spectator. The stage performance has always been there, whereas the spectator met a variety of scholarly fates.” (13). Sauter likens such historical reconstructions projects to studying the “fishbowl without the fish” (2000:19). Central to the study of the “eventness” is the role of “theatrical play” which is the

communication between the performer and spectator during the event. Sauter writes, “The player [actor] and observer [spectator] participate in the playing. [. . .] In the performative arts, the creation and the experience of it are simultaneous processes, which take place in the form of an event” (6). Sauter, like, phenomenology theorist States, discounts the value of the semiotic emphasis of understanding theatre through the reading of signs, “[S]pectators do not perceive ‘signs’ which they describe and interpret for a scholar; they perceive ‘meaning’ – and they have fun! Semiotics had no way of accounting for the pleasure and the enjoyment which spectators experience in the theatre” (3). Looking at theatre as part of a “playing culture” extends the term “theatre” to include other theatrical-like activities which are experienced synchronically in creation and reception such as concerts, sports events and social ceremonies (Cremona, et al. 13). The study of “event-ness” suggests a need for approaches to performance that move away from a dependence on the written culture of theatre.

This is not a new idea, however, and in fact leads us back to an initial concern about the lack of musical theatre scholarly criticism due to the ephemeral nature of the musical theatre experience. Scholars have struggled with what Judith A. Walker, in her essay in *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance, and Philosophy* (2006), calls the “text/performance split” (19). Walker argues that an analysis of the experience of the performance is as valid a form of theatre to study as one that privileges the text:

Theater, perhaps more than any other art form, has the power to appeal to all of these ways of knowing (ontological and epistemological) in its very form. Combining visual, auditory, and often olfactory (if not gustatory) and tactile effects, theater simply cannot be understood from an “outside” perspective that flattens its multiple sensory appeals into a text to be read. Insofar as we see, hear, smell or feel ourselves in relation to the event that takes place on stage (and often in the aisle and all around us), we are participating in an experience of understanding, not just registering the knowledge of something that stands in objective relation to our own subjectivity. (36)

The concern, then, of this paper will be to create a process for the analysis of musical theatre in performance using spectator reception terms derived from the above theories of reception and in particular focusing on the changing relationship between the audience and the stage. Throughout most of the paper I will stay situated within the frame of performance and will avoid focusing on the larger perspective of the “cultural frame” of theatre, even though that is worthy for consideration in future studies. Most discussions of spectating acknowledge that the audience participates within two frames: the world of the play and the world of the spectator. Bennett describes these two frames: “[T]he outer frame contains all those cultural elements which create and inform the theatrical event. The inner frame contains the dramatic production in a particular playing space” (Bennett 1997:139). Current musical theatre scholarship contributes considerably to the concerns of the outer frame, but is lacking in discussion of the inner frame especially in the area of the actor-spectator relationship. From Bennett, “While the outer frame (cultural background, audience and production horizons of expectations, social occasion) will always mediate and control receptive strategies available, an audience’s conscious attention is in their perception of the physical presence of a fictional world” (1997:145).

Chapter Two of this paper will include a general discussion of the experience of musical theatre and consider the goals that current musical theatre productions have for their audiences, finally situating these goals within contemporary reception concepts of community and play. Is there a “theory of musical theatre” which has expectations for its audience? I will discuss, briefly, how the audience responds to musical theatre performances and take a look at how audiences have been used for feedback in the preview processes in the development of a new musical. In addition we will interrogate the act of “viewing” as a more active role than has

previously been acknowledged through the concepts of the cognitive approach to spectating and how this shapes the audience's experience.

Chapter Three will include a discussion of the importance of the actor-spectator relationship which resonates throughout semiotics, phenomenology, cognitive approaches to spectating, and the study of the theatrical event. Although each theoretical system asserts a model unique to its own field, there are many overlaps between models. Looking at these models suggests an interesting variety in the layers of the actor-spectator relationship. I will review these models of actor-spectator relationships, stopping to note where a model intersects with relevant musical theatre practices. After this review I will develop a unique model of the actor-spectator relationship for musical theatre taking into account the peculiar practices and conventions of musical theatre in performance.

In Chapter Four, I will apply the actor-spectator relationship model terms developed in the previous chapter to an historical musical theatre event: the Boston out-of-town reception of the musical, *Oklahoma!* In particular I will examine the staging, performance and reception of the title song. I chose this particular theatrical event for examination because it is well-known and historically documented, and for many it is remembered as a spectacular moment in musical theatre. Some consider the positive reception of this performance of this song to be the turning point for the success of the musical. My goal is to examine, with historical input, what is going on between the stage and spectator that packs such a punch in this moment. Phenomenologists would call these visceral moments. My discussion will attempt to focus on the "eventness" and phenomenological impact rather than the final cultural reading. With this approach, we will focus on the actor/spectator relationship: the "fish" instead of the "fishbowl," and look for how the shifts in this relationship add or subtract to the theatrical reception. This type of historical

approach, focusing on the cognitive engagement of the audience and not the cultural or material history of the production is one of the methods suggested for further consideration and development for theatre historians by Bruce McConachie in the Epilogue in *Engaging Spectators* (2008: 185).

In Chapter Five I will utilize the actor-spectator model for musical theatre in analyses of two musicals currently in performance on Broadway: *The Gershwin's Porgy and Bess* and *Godspell*. This type of live performance analysis will focus on the communicative theatrical actions of the actors and the effect that these actions produce in the audience. I will note active spectating awareness of moments of empathy, memory, and theatrical actions and will focus on being in the event and avoid a critique of the “text” of the work or a consideration of the performance as located within a specific cultural frame or aesthetic value. Instead, I will take a fresh look at viewing musical theatre through the frame of the active and frequently changing actor-spectator relationship.

It is beyond the scope of this project to discuss all things related to audience studies on spectatorship or to discuss all things related to musical theatre. Rather this project has looked for interesting intersections, or “chiasmas,” as Suzan Lori Parks would put it, between the two and has found applications of current discourse in spectatorship to musical theatre within an interrogation of the actor-spectator relationship.

CHAPTER II

Spectators, Musicals and Cognitive Processing

What do musicals want to give to their audiences? What is the spectator's role, both as an individual spectator and as a member of the collection of people known as the "audience?" In this chapter I will discuss the communication process between the auditorium and the stage beginning with a consideration of the goals which current musical theatre productions claim to have for their audiences and a look at some examples of the ways in which the audience responds. Is there a "theory of musical theatre" which defines the role of the audience? Many musical theatre practitioners view the audience as the final "collaborator" in musical theatre. I will describe, briefly, the unique role that the audience plays in the creation of new musicals. In addition we will interrogate the act of "viewing" as a more active role than has previously been acknowledged through the concepts of the cognitive approach to spectating and how this shapes the audience's experience. Finally we will situate this discussion within contemporary reception concepts of community and play.

Recent statements from current Broadway musicals promoted on *The Broadway Channel* indicate that they expect to give to their audience some kind of pleasurable or memorable experience:

Jersey Boys: "People hug each other at the end [of the show.] They are happy to hear music they already know and share it with others."

Sister Act: “This is about friendship, enjoying life and seeing another person’s perspective.”

Rock of Ages: “This is Broadway’s best party. [Enjoy] feel good, sing out loud songs. This [show] is more than just ‘cover songs,’ it’s rock and comedy in perfect proportion.”

Memphis: “There is something for every person. This is not a ‘jukebox musical,’ but has original music in the style of the times.”

Phantom of the Opera: “Audiences are attracted because of the [phantom’s] wound.”

Priscilla, Queen of the Desert: “This is about a trio of friends who go on a heartwarming adventure through the Australia outback. There’s not just one [message] that everyone will go away with, but people will leave with a bounce in their step.” (Broadway Channel, 2 Feb. 2012)

These sentiments suggest that audiences will have some type of experience at a musical theatre performance whether it is involvement in the creation of a fictional world or it is being caught up in the collective, physical energy of live music and theatre within the community of other musical theatre-goers. This expectation of experience articulates a foundational need for reciprocity between the stage and the audience of which phenomenologist States writes, “[t]he ritual in theater is based in the community’s need for *the thing* that transpires in theater and in the designation, or self-designation, of certain individuals who, for one reason or another, consent to become the embodiment of this thing” (157 author’s emphasis). If musical theatre is willing to be the embodiment of “this thing,” what is the audience’s role?

In fact, we may need to address, at least briefly, what is an audience? Does it function as a group or as individuals? Scholars often find it challenging to locate the audience within scholarly discussions. In the 2003 essay, “Audiencing the Audience: Playback Theatre, Performative Writing, and Social Activism,” scholar Linda Park-Fuller notes this difficulty: “Paradoxically, however, while contemporary theories and methods have given us vocabularies and frameworks in which to talk about audience, they have also problematized the concept of

audience to the point of rendering it chaotic – an apparent abyss into which we, as scholars, tentatively venture” (289). Theatre theorist Herbert Blau, in his interestingly titled 1988 essay, “Hysteria, Crabs, Gospel and Random Access: Ring Around the Audience,” claims that “[An audience] does not exist before the play but is *initiated* or *precipitated* by it [. . .]” (12 author’s emphasis). Blau constructs the audience as a “body of thought and desire” (12) and would suggest that the formation of “community” within the audience is created by its encounter with the performance:

If there is an idea of community here, it is a community of the questions. And if the audience remains a problem it is because, in the construction of meaning, it is always in question. The audience is what happens when, performing the signs and passwords of a play, something postulates itself and unfolds in response. (12)

That the audience responds as a community and helps to answer the “question” of performance is something musical theatre practitioners have known, if not theorized themselves. Musicals, it is jokingly stated, are not so much *written* as *re-written* and this collaborative re-working of musicals happens in response to the material being tried out in front of an audience. As mentioned in the introduction, musicals are popular because they seek to *please* their audiences (Hirsh 5). If we could articulate a “theory” of musical theatre that has shaped musical theatre practices is might be as Foster Hirsch quotes from the legendary director, George Abbott: “Giving the customers good value while protecting his backer’s investment” (qtd. in Hirsch 4). Commercial reward is linked to audience satisfaction. Due to the enormous expense and risk in mounting a musical to open on Broadway (only 25 - 30% of shows recoup their initial investment), the “out-of-town” tryout became a staple of the process. Although it is expensive to take the show on the road, the risk of opening without the final creative process which includes an audience is considered too high. Broadway producer, Kevin McCollum, is quoted by David Finkle in a 2006 feature article for *Theatermania* as stating both the value and expectation of this

process: “It’s an expense to send your kids to college, too, but they become better people. Plus, theater is alchemy. You don’t know what you have until you see it. You really need an audience as the final step” (qtd. in Finkle 2). Current musical development practices also include workshopping the material and using extensive previews, both of which are employed with the intent to “solve” the problems of the musical before an audience. In these cases, theatre practitioners “read” the audience as a collective. Peter Filichia, in the entertaining, *Broadway’s Greatest Hits and Flops* (2010), quotes director Peter Stone on this point, “If you asked each member of an audience what’s wrong with your show, few people would be able to tell you anything constructive. But the audience as a whole watching a show lets you know when they’re engaged, amused, or bored by their attention, laughter, and applause – or lack of it” (qtd. in Filichia 183). In the book, *The Showmakers* (2002), author Lawrence Thelen cites director Graciela Daniele who uses the audience as the “final collaborator.” Thelen describes how Daniele treats the pre-opening period as a time when the audience can tell her about the work and that her key to knowing is “how to listen to them. Even when they are in silence, they are listening. It’s extraordinary what their body language and their attention [will tell you]” (qtd. in Thelen 53). Daniele also recalls shows that were re-written by as much as fifty percent within the preview period: “I have been in shows where the rewrites were every single day” (qtd. in Thelen 53).

Daniele’s comments suggest that although quiet and, seemingly, but not passive, the audience’s attention actually performs an action. Theories privileging the “active” spectator over the “passive” spectator occur regularly in theatre scholarship. In his article, “Oh for Unruly Audiences! Or, Patterns of Participation in Twentieth-Century Theatre,” (2001) for *Modern Drama*, scholar Baz Kershaw laments the lack of activity in the audience other than the action of

applause which he claims, “seduces us into the ‘logic’ of ‘private’ obedience’ to dominant ideologies” (134). Theatre theorists and practitioners such as Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal and Jerzy Grotowsky developed theatre theories which include an active role for the spectator. In some cases in mid 20th century experimental theatre the “active” spectator transformed into a “participant.” Of these practices Helen Freshwater writes in *Theatre & Audience* (2008), “Desire to reconfigure the relationship between theatre and its audiences was a recurring theme in experimental theatre practice during the twentieth century and continues to preoccupy many practitioners, and these attempts to reposition the audience have proceeded as much by castigation as they have by celebration” (2). Scholars Anthony Jackson and Shulamith Lev-Aladgem interrogate some of these 20th century forms of theatre which encourage active audience participation in their interesting essay, “Rethinking Audience Participation: Audiences in Alternative and Educational Theatre,” in *Theatrical Events: Borders Dynamics Frames* (2004). Their re-evaluation of audience participation comes to the conclusion that theatre practitioners should consider the concept of theatre as a “playing culture” as developed by Willmar Sauter and they suggest that the spectator should be viewed as an “equal” player. They write, “Audience participation at its best perhaps draws its life from the recognition that, even at its most serious and challenging, theatre is a game that requires a reciprocal playfulness” (233, 234).

Recent scholarship has challenged what is considered the “passivity” of a viewing spectator. Jacques Ranciere, in the book *The Emancipated Spectator* (2011), suggests that each audience member is engaged in her own work of interpretation: “Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation. We also learn and teach, we act and know, as spectators who link what they see with what they have seen and

told, done and dreamed” (17). Cognitive approaches to spectating also have much that is interesting and new to say about how work is accomplished by the spectator in performing the act of engaged viewing.

In *Engaging Audiences*, Bruce McConachie presents the arguments of cognitive viewing on species, social and cultural levels. Since we are focusing on the “eventness” of musical theatre in the moment of live performance, and not on its cultural or historical interpretation, we will examine the species and social cognitive processes and leave the cultural level for other authors to interrogate. Processes at the species and social level are attention, memory, visual perception, empathy, emotional contagion and imaginative play. As McConachie states in the beginning of his book,

Many elements of spectatorship are so basic that we tend to overlook them when analyzing what audiences do while engaged in a performance. We take it for granted that spectators will usually pay attention to what is happening on the stage, that they will be able to understand the sounds coming out of the actors’ mouth as intelligible communication, and that they will know what they are seeing when they perceive inanimate objects as well as live actors as they watch the show. (2008:23)

In fact, as many directors will attest, theatre practitioners use a myriad number of strategies to command and most importantly shape or focus a spectator’s attention. Most directors believe that they have a minimum of five to ten minutes to engage a spectator’s attention to hold it throughout the performance. Director Richard Maltby states, “The most important thing to do is define what the story is and how you’re going to tell it to the audience – how you’re going to command their attention” (qtd. in Thelan 101). He also notes that “the director should have a sense of impatience – an impatience that reflects an audience’s impatience. You want to be given the information and then you want to get on” (qtd. in Thelan 110). During the out-of town tryout for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, “show doctor” Jerome Robbins realized that a replacement was needed for the pleasant, but

bland opening number ballad “Love is in the Air” to set the tone for the rest of show. The enduringly popular song “Comedy Tonight” was created as the result of that intervention (Thelan 207). Some directors work to avoid lengthy scene changes that reduce spectator engagement. Director Jerry Zaks suggests a very active approach: “How will the transitions happen so that we can keep telling the story without dead time, without giving the audience a chance to sit back, space out, anticipate what’s going to happen? How can we relentlessly assault them with our evening so that they’re transported?” (qtd. in Thelan 236). The spectator’s reception of such information is more complicated than it seems because according to McConachie, “their brains must process form, color, movement, timbre, pitch, rhythm, and other features of the aural visual surround separately and then integrate the results into what can be interpreted as a momentary mental sound-picture” (2008:26). A spectator may also be processing information from other audience members too, such as someone’s coughing or the hair of the person in front of them, but her consciousness “easily divides them into separate perceptual events, two distinct gestalts. Even without a proscenium arch our audience member could easily separate the world of the stage event from other events happening at the same time. Conscious attention can process several realities within a few milliseconds” (McConachie 2008:28). At the species level, cognitive scientists, make the suggestion that sex and gender do not shape a spectator’s ability for attention. McConachie states that “[S]cientists have noted no sex differences in simple matters of cognitive attention, such as gaze-tracking and multi-tasking” (2008:31).

Most productions seek to reinforce the action of spectator memory. Theatre practitioners rely on spectators to remember characters from moment to moment and understand the words they are speaking. Current cognitive thought suggests that memory is not stored like “snapshots”

on a hard-drive in the brain, but is more of an active process of reconstruction. McConachie reports:

[Memory] is, in some sense a form of constructive recategorization during ongoing experience, rather than a precise replication of a previous sequence of events. [. . .] Short-term memory has an “attention span” of about fifteen seconds, which means that audiences may forget an important detail of the action unless the playwright locates it in a wider context that indirectly reminds them of the detail several times. Perceptions of new events are kept “alive” in the brain for the short term and relegated to long-term memory primarily through repetition or some gauge of importance. (2008: 34)

In the 1994 essay “The Haunted Stage: Recycling and Reception in the Theatre,” theatre theorist Marvin Carlson notes how memories from past performances can have a “ghosting” (17) effect on the reception of a current performance when staging, props, costumes and even actors are “recycled” from one production to the next. Carlson suggests that audiences actually prefer the recognition of the familiar, including worn-out plot devices:

The basic plot has proven astonishingly durable, but the theatre of almost every historical period has placed heavy reliance upon plots of similar predictability (consider, for example, nineteenth century melodramas) and such predictability, far from discouraging spectators, has clearly contributed to their enjoyment. Re-experience becomes an essential part of experience. (1994:7)

Audience recognition of actors known for other roles provides a “living quote” (Carlson 1994:14). Carlson concludes that “the interplay of publicity, collective audience memory, and actor and director awareness of these matters can produce reception layerings of great complexity and yet of great theatrical effectiveness” (1994:13).

In their article “The Memory of the Spectator” (2000) in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Roger Deldime and Jeanne Pigeon discuss how memories are *created* during a production. They write: “Theatrical memories, being an evolutionary and dynamic process, depend on the characteristics of each performance but also upon the nature of the theatre-goer him/herself, who will select, alter, build up again . . . and forget. . .” (6). Their research indicated that the

theatrical moments which spectators are able to later recall most vividly are those that brought pleasure through “emotional load, intensity and theatrical relevance of images” (7).

Spectators also use memory to construct cognitive concepts. Concepts are not just “mental abstractions” but are embodied and nonrepresentational. Cognitive concepts arise, fundamentally from the experience of the body in the world. According to McConachie, “forward/back” is a spatial concept arising from the fact that we have eyes in the front of our heads, and not at the side. “Source-path-goal” is learned from infants crawling from a starting point to an end point and symmetry of the human form leads to dualisms: right/left, wide-narrow, high/low (2008:39). Interestingly these embodied concepts can cross over to wider metaphors as McConachie states, “Our embodied investment in “balance,” for example, shapes not only how we move but also a wide variety of our practical metaphors, including conceptions of health (“well-balanced”) and justice (“balancing scales”) that appear to cross all human language and cultures” (2008:40). These embodied concepts have implications for how spectators react to theatre spaces. In *Performance and Cognition*, F. Elizabeth Hart quotes earlier work by McConachie regarding an analysis of stage space:

Traditional proscenium staging owes both its structure and its illusion of spectator objectivity to image schemas related to near/far and center/periphery, schemas based on human sight patterns that promote the idea of marginalization. Alternatively, promenade stage [open stage with no separation between actor and spectator] depends more on the image schema of CONTAINMENT [or lack thereof], in which actors and spectators occupy almost the same space, enabling a mutuality of actor-spectator gaze and thus promoting an overall sense of inclusiveness of community. (qtd. in McConachie and Hart 39)

Two or more concepts can be blended together to create new metaphors that move beyond the simple extension of basic concepts to new territory. Conceptual blending provides the cognitive basis of theatrical doubleness which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Cognitive science also suggests scientific reasons for the spectatorial action and experience of empathy. What happens, cognitively, when spectators project themselves into the emotional life of an actor/character on stage? According to McConachie, before spectators can form a “sympathetic response” with characters they must first ascribe “beliefs, desires, intentions and emotions to them: they must be able to read their minds. How spectators “read the minds” of actors/characters onstage is not much different than how people intuit each other’s attitudes and intention in real life” (2008:66). Empathy, triggered by intentional actions onstage, often leads to the transfer of emotions from person to person. In her article, “Interplay: The Method and Potential of a Cognitive Scientific Approach to Theatre” (2007), Amy Cook describes how “mirror neurons” in spectators create embodied empathetic responses that imitate the action onstage:

A performance that activates imitation in an audience is likely to be (almost literally) moving. Mirror neurons themselves do not discriminate between an act performed and a witnessed act. Since watching is – at least for some neurons – the same as doing, drama *inspires* the imitation of an action rather than *being* an imitation of an action. In some scenes, this imitation might take the form of understanding the goal of the action performed onstage: the broadly congruent mirror neurons alert the spectator to the fact that the character picks up the gun in order to shoot it; in other scenes, such imitation might be the mental simulation required to understand the emotions expressed onstage. And in some scenes, the spectator will find that he or she is tensing muscles, crying, breathing differently, leaning forward, smiling, or turning away – it is the power and pervasiveness of *audience* imitation that is central to theatre. (591 author’s emphasis)

Of course any discussion of empathy will be affected by the “ghosting” of the theories of Bertolt Brecht, and McConachie clarifies the cognitive position on this:

Empathy as simulation for mind reading is a different notion of empathy than that understood by many modernists and critics in the theatre. Bertolt Brecht, for example, conflated empathy with sympathy and feared that empathizing audiences would turn passive [. . .]. Like most westerners at mid-century, Brecht misunderstood the cognitive process of simulation. Empathy may produce sympathy, but the ability to simulate another’s state of mind is usually prior to the kind of judgment that induces sympathy or antipathy. (2008:76)

It is interesting to also consider what phenomenologist States has to say about empathy: “[C]an art ever deliver itself from empathy? Isn’t empathy the force that keeps us in our theater seats? In short, a kind of sensory self-projection, or willingness to vibrate in tune with the work, with whatever the work may be up to” (104).

During workshop previews of the musical *A Chorus Line*, it became apparent that the audience was unhappy with the fictional director, Zach. Their empathetic involvement over his choices of the final dancers for the fictional performance resulted in actual physical harm to the actor playing Zach. Actor Bob Lupone is quoted in *On The Line: The Creation of A Chorus Line* (2006) as recalling, “One night someone at the Newman [Theatre] tripped me, on cement. I didn’t make it to the curtain call because they were furious that I didn’t give some people the job, or didn’t give Cassie the job, or whatever. I was sent to the hospital because I hurt my knees” (qtd. in Viagas et al. 238). To keep his dancers on edge, the real director, Michael Bennett, had made different selections for the final eight for each performance. The palpable reaction from the audience when Cassie was not picked incited a change to this practice. Marsha Mason, wife of playwright Neil Simon, is quoted as advising Bennett, “You simply cannot do that. It might be more truthful, but you can’t just kill off people’s [the audience’s] hope” (qtd. in Viagas et al. 239). The final set list of “chosen” auditioners became “Cassie,” “Bobby,” “Judy,” “Richie,” “Val,” “Mark,” “Diana,” and “Mike.” Input from the audience was so valuable in the shaping of this innovative musical that theatre critic Walter Kerr described *A Chorus Line* as “a hit that was made by the public” (qtd. in Viagas et al. 256).

Highlighting the effect of music and sound, McConachie suggests that “Spectatorial empathy appears to be strongest when combinations of sound and movement entrain our bodies” (2008:71). Research suggests that even if their eyes were closed, audiences would pick up the

happy intention of a song like “Whistle a Happy Tune” from the musical *The King and I* (1951) and that “rhythmic patterns lock in motor responses at the neurological level usually producing emotions below the level of consciousness” (2008:68). This inward consciousness may manifest itself in an outward sign such as toe tapping. Such responses may be shared from spectator to spectator and McConachie thinks that you can “catch” an emotion just like you catch a cold: “Emotional contagion in a theatre is automatic and usually very quick. Audiences will tend to laugh, cry, and even gasp simultaneously. The more spectators join together in one emotion, the more empathy shapes the emotional response of the rest” (2008:97). Music plays a significant role in conveying emotions across a group. McConachie states, “In the presence of musical or spoken [emotion], audiences will recognize and embody this emotion, or any other. Put us together in an auditorium and our bodies and minds are like the inside of a good violin; we resonate and amplify emotions with each other” (2008 97).

In her essay, “Performing Emotions: How to Conceptualize Emotional Contagion in Performance” (2010), theatre theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte discusses the conflicting historical positions to the concept of emotional contagion:

[T]he term *contagion* was used in a way that related it to a kind of magical process [. . .] whereas for others it was considered “a profoundly harmful, destructive and estranging (from oneself and from God) disturbance [...]. Both emphasized that the contagion leads to a transformation of the spectator: it “heals” the sickness of passion, or results in the loss of self-control or a change of ones’ identity. (29)

She states that, “such transformative potential was conceptualized as arising from the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, understood as the foundation and the cause of such contagion” (29). Following a description of a performance of *The Barber of Seville* during which the audience erupted with cheers and the “performance had to be paused for the people’s emotions to be released,” Fischer-Lichte theorizes, “Here, emotions are brought forth and shaped by a social

situation defined by the performance. They are articulated physically and presented in order to be perceived – they are performed both by the actors and by the spectators. The emotions are located neither within nor without the individuals, but in the field between them.” (31). Fischer-Lichte calls the transformation process a liminal experience and suggests:

[T]he transformations caused by liminality in a theatre performance are predominantly temporary; they take effect only for the duration of the performance or even for limited periods of time within the performance. Such transformations include physiological, emotional, energetic and motoric changes. They can also lead to an actual change of status – from spectator to actor – or produce emotional communities. (37)

These moments of harmonious liminality, this emotional interstice between actor and spectator, strikes a similar chord with recent work by theatre criticism theorist Jill Dolan in her book, *Utopia in Performance* (2005). As Dolan describes in the epilogue, “Throughout *Utopia in Performance*, I’ve suggested that moments of liminal clarity and communion, fleeting, briefly transcendent bits of profound human feeling and connection, spring from alchemy between performers and spectators [. . .]” (2005:168). She suggests that this can grow out of the spectator’s relationship to the actor:

Audiences often form community around a common present experience of love for a charismatic, virtuosic performer, not necessarily around their desire to be close to him or her, but through the performer, to be pulled into comfortable, more intimate proximity to each other. Intersubjectivity extends beyond the binary of performer-spectator (or even performers-audience) into an affective possibility among members of the audience. (2005:31)

Dolan calls these moments, moments of “communitas,” where individuals become a community:

This, for me, is the beginning (and perhaps the substance) of the utopian performance; in the performer’s grace, in the audience’s generosity, in the lucid power or intersubjective understanding however fleeting. These are the moments when we can believe in utopia. These are the moments theater and performance make possible. (2005:62)

Dolan’s articulation of the generosity of the actor-spectator relationship and the formation of community links directly to the concept of “play” as theorized by Willmar Sauter, Peter

Eversmann, and the members of the Theatrical Event working group. This is the communication between the performer and spectator during the event, with the actor and spectator participating with equal agency. As Sauter suggests, “The actor and the spectator carry out their actions in the consensus of the theatrical situation” (2000: 8). This type of positive communicative experience sounds very much like the kind of experience advertised by the musicals listed at the start of this chapter. In similar fashion, in an empirical study of Dutch audiences, Eversmann found that audiences wanted “the feeling of being carried away by the performance,” but in their involvement also experienced “a sense of concentration, clarity, control, wholeness and sometimes transcendence of ego boundaries” (qtd. in Cremona et al. 146). As stated by McConachie, “According to Sauter and Eversmann, many spectators experience what they term joy, wholeness freedom, and other effects of playing after attending theatrical performances” (2008:52).

We have discussed how through the active process of spectating, individuals at musical theatre performance form communities that “vibrate” in tune with the production. Far from being passive, the audience has an “affective possibility,” a creative stake in the performance. The spectator is not just a gaze, but an embodied cognitive being. As Herbert Blau and theories of cognitive spectating confirm, “In the perceptual dynamics of the audience are questions of memory, mirroring, perspective, and the spatializing of thought itself, its siting in speculation” (13). The communication between the auditorium and stage, the “theatrical play” in the event of performance produces what both Fischer-Lichte and Dolan describe as a formation of community in the audience, the *communitas*, the moments of liminal connectivity which can be sited around the actor – spectator relationship. This relationship will be the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter III

The Actor – Spectator Relationship: Developing a Model for Musical Theatre Performance Application

In this chapter we will first determine the importance of the actor to the spectator in the reception of a production by discussing the results of Willmar Sauter's audience study called "Theatre Talks." Moving from the empirical to the theoretical we will discuss the "double consciousness" of the actor-spectator relationship where the spectator perceives not only the fictional character the actor is portraying but the artistic skill of the actor herself. This multilayered relationship of the actor to the spectator has been examined in cognitive approaches to spectating, phenomenology theories in theatre, the theatrical event approach, and the semiotic approach. We will look at these models of actor-spectator relationship, stopping to note when the model raises interesting intersections with musical theatre practices. After examining these I will develop a model that seems to fit the peculiar and special characteristics of the actor-spectator relationship in musical theatre.

In his book *The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception* (2000) Willmar Sauter describes the empirical method he developed and the results of his research when he set out to find out what the spectator thinks in a theatrical event. Sauter developed the methodology of "Theatre Talks," where organized groups of spectators met after viewing a performance to sit down and talk about their individual experiences (Sauter 176). A complete

description of his process and results are found in the chapter “Theatre Talks” in the aforementioned book and I recommend it highly. What is of interest, for our purposes, are some of the surprising results Sauter found. In parallel with the “Theatre Talks” was a traditional survey of audience demographics, preferences, habits and experiences with respect to attending theatre. About this Sauter notes, “All these factors relate strongly to the sociocultural patterns in a society. Amazingly enough, they do not influence the actual experience of performances to the degree that could be expected [. . .]” (Sauter 183). Aware that women dominate today’s theatre auditoriums in the Western world, Sauter expected that “women might experience performances in a special way, displaying stronger empathy or using a wider range of the imagination, understanding, and emotions. None of these hypotheses could be proved true. On the contrary: of all the background variables, the difference in gender was the least significant. The difference between men and women, so predominant in their interest in theatre, diminishes to practically nothing as soon as they are seated to watch the performance”² (Sauter 184). A factor which did cause the most variation in reception and understanding was age. Sauter describes their results,

Despite the even distribution of ages in the auditorium, the experience of theatre performances differs widely. Younger people are more interested in the fictional story presented on stage, whereas the interest in the actors and the staging increases steadily with the age of the spectator; the older the spectators grow, the more they judge what they see. [. . .] The dividing line seems to be around twenty years of age: a seventeen-year-old is more different from a twenty-five-year-old than the twenty-five-year-old is from a fifty year-old. (Sauter 184)³

² About this point Sauter does note, “more sophisticated methods might bring forward nuances which were not covered in these initial studies in the 1980s” (Sauter 184).

³ This study found adolescents rejected complex characters and that their sense of theatrical qualities was much different than older audience members. Sauter notes that the “division between youths and grownups is so strongly marked that it almost shocked people who worked professionally with educational theatre. This is obviously something to bear in mind when school classes are sent to regular performances for educational reasons. A classical drama can become as boring as a lesson in geography, and many of the students will never return to either theatre or geography” (Sauter 184).

The final surprising discovery was the enormous impact of the actor-spectator relationship to the spectator's overall appreciation of the performance. In particular, the importance of the acting is considered highly relevant for the audience's understanding of the production as Sauter found: "[T]he appreciation of the acting is also decisive for the spectator's interest in the fiction of the performance: if the actors' quality is considered poor, then spectators are not prepared to discuss the content of the play; only when they enjoy the acting will there also be an interest in what the performance was all about" (Sauter 185). Sauter also makes this observation:

Sometimes the whole theatre business seems to be preoccupied with finding the right play and developing the director's concept; yet the spectators in the auditorium react foremost to what they actually have in front of them: the actors. [. . .] Of paramount importance is the sensitive act of communication between actor and spectator, taking place over and over in every performance. Here I certainly arrived at the very core of my theatre studies. (185, 186)

Sauter notes that older audience members appreciate not only the "fictional world" of the production, but also the artistic factors of the elements of production.

In his essay, "Infiction and Outfiction" in *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance, and Philosophy* (2006), David Z. Saltz discusses how audiences are able to equally appreciate the fictional narrative of a performance as well as be aware of the technical aspects of production and that rather than creating separate experiences, the merging of these experiences enhances the appreciation. Saltz quotes Kendall Walton, author of *Mimesis as Make Believe*, to illustrate his point,

Seeing an image in a drawing or painting [. . .] one attends to the canvas as well as the picture's representational content, [and] these are not two separable experiences but distinguishable aspects of the same one [. . .] This duality consists simply in the fact that one uses the picture as a prop in a visual game: one imagines seeing a mill, and one does so because one notices the relevant features of the canvas. (qtd. in Krasner and Saltz 210)

Theatre historian, Julia A. Walker, in her contribution to *Staging Philosophy* uses a 19th century journal entry by Boston socialite Anna Cabot Lowell Quincy which describes the performance of actress Fanny Kemble in Henry Milman's play *Fazio* to suggest the double consciousness of the spectator toward the actor's performance:

The moment which I think produced most effect on the house was at the moment when Fazio is to be lead off to execution in the prison. She has just been imploring the jailer to delay a few moments in the most passionate manner, when the bell tolls, the sound of which seemed to turn her into marble. She stood riveted to the spot—her eyes fixed her cheek pale and ashen. Fazio embraces her, but she is entirely insensible of it, and he is led off the stage leaving her the solitary figure. She stood, I should think, five moments, a perfect statue, and the deathlike stillness that reigned over the crowded audience, every person seeming to hold their breath, was very striking. “She stood the bloodless image of despair” until the bell tolled again. (Quincy qtd. in Walker 36)

Walker suggests that Quincy's use of “she” to refer both to the character and to the actress reveals that, “Quincy simultaneously marvels at Kemble's technical skill and vicariously experiences the pathos of the situation her character is in. She is both “inside” the imaginative fiction of the play and “outside” it, observing Kemble's technique” (Walker 37). Walker notes that she personally experienced this oscillating dynamic when she attended a performance of Julie Taymor's *The Lion King*. She describes how while she was caught up in the fictional narrative which included a moment of peril for Simba when the rhinoceroses began to charge, she was also synchronically fascinated by the “exposed technical apparatus behind [Taymor's] puppetry . . . [which] creates the illusion we find so terrifying” (Walker 38). Walker comments on how this double awareness by the spectator enhances the reception of the production:

[L]ike Quincy's response to Kemble, my response was not simply one of creating a tactical “inside” from which to observe the performance [. . .]. It was an “inside” perspective that was predicated on an affective and experiential relationship to what I saw, heard, and felt. It was an affective and experiential relationship that made my rational comprehension of the play's moral about the importance of community all the more complete. (Walker 38)

Bruce McConachie, utilizing a cognitive approach, adds spectatorial agency to the double consciousness of the actor-spectator relationship when he writes, “Spectators are active agents in the process of combining actors and characters into blended actor/character” (McConachie 2008:44). He notes that being ‘inside’ the character or admiring the actor from the ‘outside’ is not an ‘either/or’ proposition for the spectator, but that:

Spectators can and do use blending with flexibility. When spectators blend identity with actors and characters to create actor/characters, they can add more or less of each ingredient to whip up their theatrical recipes. If a star actor with a strong persona is playing a role, the spectator might mix in a cup full of “actor” with only a teaspoon of “character” to create a particular actor/character in their minds. (McConachie 2008:44)

McConachie suggests that the Roman critic Horace used the term “blend” to describe the goal of art. “Although Horace knew nothing of the neuroscience and psychology of conceptual blending, he hit on a definition of art that suggests the necessity of blending to enable dramatic impersonation: ‘useful’ actors must combine with ‘delightful’ characters before a blended actor/character can emerge” (McConachie 2008:34).

Although the cognitive approach constructs the blending as being formed by the spectator, both McConachie and phenomenologist Bert O. States concur that the actor-spectator relationship as a form of theatrical communication is a two way street. The phenomenological model put forth by States in his book *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* (1985) uses pronouns to help define the actor-spectator relationship. He suggests that the actor’s relationship to the audience (and conversely the audience’s perception of the actor) can shift keys into these modes during a performance:

I (actor) = Self – expressive mode

You (audience) = Collaborative mode

He (character) = Representational mode (States 160)

The “Self-expressive” mode is employed when the spectator is aware of the “artist” in the actor and the actor is performing on his own behalf, possibly aware of his own virtuosity. The “Colloborative” mode has a sense of “we are in this together” and is used when the actor, as States says, “plays a character who lives in a world that includes the audience” (States 170). The “Representational” mode is when the spectator focuses on the character constructed by the actor and the fictional world of the production, and the actor immerses himself into that character. States provides examples of actors in spoken drama in these modes, but it may be interesting to turn here to the world of musical theatre to see if these modes hold true for that theatrical world as well. Examples of roles that illustrate the actor-spectator relationship in the Self-Expressive mode include Benjamin Walker as Andrew Jackson in *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* (2010), Sarah Brightman as Christine in *Phantom of the Opera* (1998), Idina Menzel as Elphaba and Kristin Chenoweth as Galinda in *Wicked* (2003), Sutton Foster as *Millie in Thoroughly Modern Millie* (2002), Robert Cuccioli as Jekyll/Hyde in *Jekyll and Hyde* (1997), Marissa Jaret Winokur as Tracy Turnblat in *Hairspray* (2002), and Ben Vereen in *Pippin* (1972). Clive Barnes’ review from the *Times* regarding Vereen’s performance accurately describes the Self-Expressive mode, “[V]ereen here shows all the makings of a superstar himself. His mocking presence and voice, his deft dancing and easy authority, make his performance one of the most impressive aspects of the evening” (qtd. in Suskin 1997:717). It is not that these roles don’t have a fictional element to be constructed as well, but I would suggest that the appreciation of this role is due more to the artistry of the performer and the apparent enjoyment of the actor in the role, than the construction of a fleshed out character. I have intentionally avoided using examples with major musical theatre stars in “star vehicles” which would be consistent with the examples provided by States, because we will encounter a more thorough discussion of the actor-spectator relationship with

the added layer of “celebrity” a little later. Inherent in the musical theatre genre is that actors sing and dance and they do it well regardless of the “character” they are playing. For example, a realistic portrayal of an orphan girl who can’t sing a note would not contribute to the enjoyment of the musical, *Annie*. Consequently the “Representational Mode” through which the actor constructs a character will always have some layer of artistry, but some musicals, due to a complicated book require strong acting performances in this mode to help the spectator understand the “fiction” or “story.” Examples of roles of this type include J. Robert Spencer as Dan Goodman in *Next to Normal* (2009), Michael Crawford as the Phantom in the *Phantom of the Opera* (1988), Colm Wilkinson as Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*, Rebecca Luker as Maria in the 1998 revival of *The Sound of Music*, and Joan Roberts as Laurey in *Oklahoma!* (1943). The *New York Times* critic, Ben Brantley, articulates the subsuming of the actor into the character with his review of J. Robert Spencer’s performance in *Next To Normal*: “That Mr. Spencer presents Dan as a weaker soul . . . doesn’t mean he’s giving a weaker performance. The character’s cheerful neutrality, which pervades even Mr. Spencer’s clear tenor, summons the evaporating spirit of a man who is slowly erasing himself” (Brantley 1).

Considering the “Collaborative Mode” we could use examples of “narrator” types of roles who create an element of “we” with the audience such as Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* who talks directly to the audience and God; Officer Lockstock and Little Sally in *Urinetown, the Musical* who comment on the action for the benefit of the audience; the Narrator in *Into the Woods* who presumably narrates the tale for the spectator’s behalf until he is unsettlingly sacrificed to the Giant by the other characters in the musical. The Emcee in *Cabaret* is a narrator of sorts, but the question is does the spectator want to collaborate with him? He seems to have a hidden agenda of his own which creates levels of ambiguity for the spectator rather than

clarification. A convention of musical theatre which is not necessarily a “character” or “actor” but which performs a highly collaborative role is the orchestra.

The orchestra, seemingly omniscient and often unseen, is really the voice of the composer/orchestrator who acts as a musical narrator (or like a good friend who’s seen the show before) and who alerts the spectator to pay attention to new information or to make new connections through repetitions of musical themes. It is always in the “We” mode because it has the intention to be in the world of the audience. It is not a convention of musical theatre to allow an onstage actor to acknowledge or “hear” the music played by the orchestra (unless it is a diegetic song), but the spectator gets the sense of what a character is thinking or feeling by the music being played. The orchestra is a gossip who suggests what we should think about a character before they even appear onstage. For example, in Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Phantom of the Opera* the low, scary and dramatic chromatic tone motif, heard prior to the Phantom’s appearance, becomes associated as his “theme” music. This motif acquires meaning which reminds the audience of the Phantom’s brooding presence, even when he is not onstage. Orchestral underscoring relies on the spectator’s memory to make these associations and adds greater level of meaning to the onstage action (Martin and Sauter 149). The orchestra can usefully clue a spectator as to whether action is continuing or ending. For example, the nearly fifteen minute sequence of “If I Loved You” in the musical *Carousel*, ends with some trivial dialogue between Billy and Julie. Without the orchestral accompaniment a spectator might think the scene was over, however, as the orchestra brings the “If I Loved You” theme to a new dramatic height, the spectator becomes aware that the unresolved moment between Billy and Julie is building toward something just as the music is building. In the final dramatic chords of the music, Billy and Julie kiss and the music of the orchestra resolves and this scene finally ends.

The addition of applause from the audience finalizes the “we” moment between the orchestra and the spectator. British director John Doyle created a new collaborative model for the orchestra in his highly successful productions of *Sweeney Todd* and *Company*, casting actors who could also double as musicians and accompany each other. Although he originally developed this approach out of economic necessity, Doyle stated in an interview in *American Theatre* how he feels his approach heightens the collaborative mode between actor and spectator,

[I]t gets back to what theatre is all about, it gets back to why people perform. The honesty of the relationship between the actor and the audience is key: We’re telling you this story. We’re not pretending. We’re all in the same place at the same time. We want to break through the fourth wall. We’re actually here together, the actors and the audience. It’s back to basics – people are attracted to the simplicity and the honesty of the story telling. (qtd. In Pender 48)

So far we have only looked at States’ phenomenological model of the modes of actor-spectator relationship. Willmar Sauter, whose research focuses on the actor-spectator relationship within the “theatrical event,” also proposes a more complex phenomenological model which includes specific action of the performer: “Presentation Actions;” and specific emotional and cognitive reactions from the spectator which he calls “Perception Reactions.” Although he uses new terminology we can see that many of these relate to the concepts discussed in the previous chapter about active cognitive spectating, including: attention, empathy, memory and new processes of evaluation, expectation, and interpretation. Sauter broadens the actor-spectator relationship to a model of “theatrical communication” (Sauter 7).

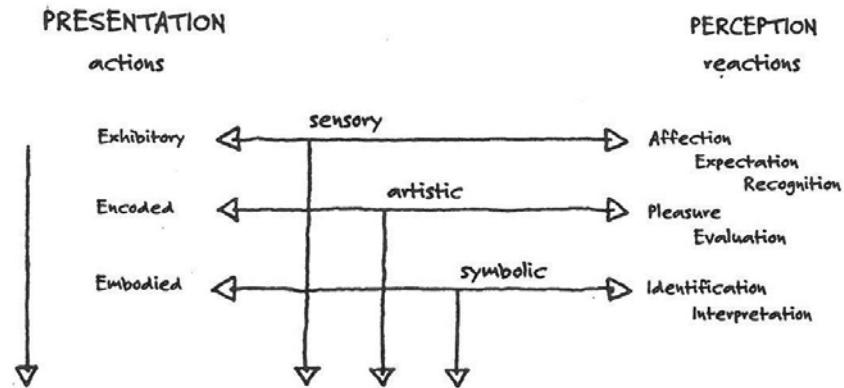


Figure 1: Sauter Model of Theatrical Communication

Sauter's work resonates with the cognitive spectating concept of spectorial agency which suggests that the spectator is actively creating and shifting "blends" throughout a performance. Sauter notes that the actor-spectator relationship changes frequently within a performance and that "this interplay of the communication levels on behalf of both performer and the spectator is an important feature of my model and accounts for the dynamic of the performance" (Martin and Sauter 89).

The "Artistic" level in this model is similar to the "Self-Expressive" mode of States. For the equivalent of the "Representational" mode of States' Sauter uses the term: "Symbolic." In an earlier iteration of his model, Sauter used the term "Performative." I prefer to utilize that term in that it captures the *being* as well as the *doing* of the action. "Performative" indicates the mutual activity of the actor and spectator to create a character in performance who is only *described* in the text. Another new concept in Sauter's model is the "Sensory" level which is primarily the recognition of the actors' and spectators' bodies in a shared space. Sauter finds this to be the first critical engagement for theatrical communication. He explains, "If the sensory level of communication fails, the spectator will most likely lose his or her interest in the scenic action, and the performer loses interest in giving his or her best on stage. As a consequence, the

whole theatrical event falls short of its meaning, which both personal experiences and empirical reception studies have shown” (Martin and Sauter 79). This, in a way, articulates the magnitude of the “eventness” of musical theatre productions and the expectation of the musical theatre spectator to engage with those on the stage. Director Hal Prince, who “sees the audience’s participation in a musical as vital:” describes it this way, “In the theatre the compact between the audience and the stage is an active one as it is nowhere else” (qtd.in Thelan 182). Suzanne M. Jaeger, a contributor to *Staging Philosophy* describes the ontology of presence in performance and the relationship it forms between actor and spectator,

Performers [. . .] sometimes talk about “being in the moment” or having an “on performance,” in the sense of being really on top of it, or in good form. Sometimes this sense involves both for the performer and for the audience an awareness of things uniquely coming together. One sees brilliance, a special communication between the artist(s) and the audience, a sensuously and perhaps emotionally heightened, lively awareness that unfolds within and is unique to a specific performance. The “on moment” occurs when the performer not only correctly repeats everything she rehearsed, but also has a keen awareness of herself, the other performers and the audience in the immediacy of live performance. It is reported by performers as a feeling of being fully alive to the audience, and other performers [. . .] (qtd. In Krasner and Saltz 123)

Sometimes this kind of intensity doesn’t occur through a whole production, but happens, ecstatically, in one big number. Musical theatre terms this a “show-stopper,” because the audience literally stops the show with their enthusiastic reaction. A 1964 review by John McClain of the musical *Hello, Dolly!* aptly describes such a moment in the performance of the title song, “It is difficult to describe the emotion [the “Hello, Dolly! number] produces. Last night the audience nearly tore up the seats as she led the parade of waiters in a series of encores over the semi-circular runway which extends around the orchestra pit out into the audience” (qtd. in Suskin1990:299).

Some additional new terms in Sauter’s model are worth exploring; the stage actions listed on the left of his model. Sauter lists these under the term “Presentation” showing that these

actions have an intent to be seen: “no matter what the purpose of this presentation is, [t]hey are presented for someone, a spectator who perceives them” (Sauter 6). The “Exhibitory Action” is the willful engagement of the stage space by the actor to present herself to the spectator which creates the “Sensory” communication between the actor and spectator. The “Encoded” action refers to the understanding of the “codes” of the genre and the conventions relevant to the type of performance, in our example musical theatre, and simply specifies more exactly what actions might comprise the Artistic/Self-expressive mode. In musical theatre this would include not just virtuosic acting, but artistry in singing and dancing. The “Embodied” action is described by Sauter:

[These] designate the activities of the performer which aim at the presentation of fictional images. [. . .] I want to underline the fact that the fictional character is created by the performer and spectator together. There is no [Mama Rose] on stage: [she] is only in the mind of the spectator, aided through the images presented by the performer. Even on this level the spectator reacts emotionally . . . and intellectually by interpreting the actions on stage (Sauter 9).

This is related to the willingness to “play” as discussed by McConachie in the previous chapter and which is a major concept in Sauter’s understanding of the “theatrical event.”

All three levels of communication in Sauter’s model happen within a specific amount of time, indicated by the three down arrows. However, rather than operating at discrete times, Sauter suggests how they build dynamically over time:

The three levels exist parallel to each other and are tightly interwoven. This pattern is not stable during an entire performance. The different levels might be of different importance at different moments, mingle with each other, accumulate information and regain information from memory, perhaps unite into one strong and dominant feeling for some short time, disperse into side levels when personal references lead to significant interpretations, etc. The communication between performer and spectator is a continuing and dynamic process. (Martin and Sauter 84)

Looking at another model we can examine the actor-spectator relationship proposed by semiotics theatre theorist Michael Quinn and derived from the Prague School model of analysis

on the phenomenology and semiotics of acting. This model utilizes three principal components of performance, which have similarities to the models discussed thus far:

1. Performer's personal characteristics
2. Immaterial dramatic character residing in the consciousness of the audience
3. An image of that character created by the actor, costume designer, director, etc. As a kind of technical object or signifier. (Quinn 156)

Quinn states that "Every acting event contains within it some relative blend of performer, acting figure and character" (155). This concept of interplay sounds similar to what we discussed about the dynamic shifts or oscillating blends that creates a rich and multi-layered experience. Quinn's discussion adds to these aspects of acting three analogous functions: "Expressive," "Referential" and the third function which he describes as "[T]he [spectator's share which] involves the audience conative contribution; in live performance the audience laughs, applauds, holds its breath and in every performance images of character are funded from the personal storehouse of the experience that constitutes each viewer's competence" (Quinn 155).

This relationship is shown in this triangle diagram:

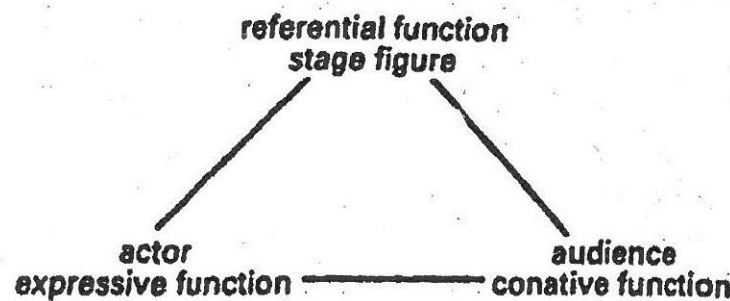


Figure 2: Quinn Semiotic Model of Actor-Spectator Relationship

What complicates the spectator-actor relationship above and that which we have not yet discussed is the concept of "Celebrity" of which Quinn says:

Celebrity brings the personal, expressive function of acting into the foreground. [. . .] They bring something to the role other than a harmonious blend of features, an overdetermined quality that exceeds the needs of the fiction, and keeps them from disappearing entirely into the acting figure or the drama. Rather, their contribution to the performance is often a kind of collision with the role, sometimes hard to accept, but sometimes, too, loaded with the spectacular energy that an explosive crash can release. (Quinn 155)

One need only look at some of the recent musicals on Broadway to concur that “Celebrity” is a factor in the reception of the musical. Consider the recent celebrity turn in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (2009) by Daniel Radcliffe of Harry Potter fame, or Christina Applegate in *Sweet Charity* (2005) or Hugh Jackman in *The Boy From Oz* (2003). Celebrity can add a layer of excitement, but it can also be distracting and distance a spectator from the author/creative team’s intent of the work. Consider this well known musical theatre anecdote relayed by William Goldman, author of *The Season*:

Audiences loved Zero Mostel in *Fiddler on the Roof*. . . but most people connected with the show felt that the show improved after Mostel left it. For Mostel, brilliant as he is, can be destructive to a production. A *Fiddler* expert told me: “Mostel was good for about what people predicted – two months – and even at his worst he was still marvelous for 95% of the audience. But that other 5% would sit there and think, ‘What in the hell is he doing?’ It wasn’t so much that he ad-libbed; what he did was really mysterious. He would extend pieces of business, and somehow – no one could ever tell quite how he managed it – he would reshape the relative weights of scenes so that they became about him whether they were supposed to be about him or not.” (17)

In some cases the creative team may actually prefer to create the production as a star or “celebrity vehicle.” Consider the musical *Annie Get Your Gun* with music and lyrics by Irving Berlin and a book by Herbert and Dorothy Fields. This musical was built around its pre-cast star, Ethel Merman, whose celebrity tendency to push herself into the spotlight was considered desirable (Most 122). That *Annie Get Your Gun* is both specifically and theatrically about “show business” adds more potential levels to the actor-spectator relationship as it includes not only the star and the “celebrity” persona of the star, but also the character of Annie Oakley and

the “celebrity” Annie Oakley. These increasingly blurry boundaries are noted by theatre historian, Andrea Most, when she describes the moment when the actor playing Annie Oakley sees herself on an enormous publicity poster for the rifle show:

“It’s me! Was I up there all the time?” She touches the face of the image and then touches her own face as if to say, “Which is the real Annie?” After gazing at her picture on the billboard for a moment, Annie sings a verse of “There’s No Business Like Show Business” in which she recognizes – and even pays tribute to – the confusing relationship between the “real” Annie and the “theatrical star.” (Most 119)

I was fortunate to see the 1999 revival of *Annie Get Your Gun* starring Bernadette Peters, a celebrity for my generation of the magnitude of Ethel Merman for her 1946 audience. As a spectator I experienced the artistry of actor Bernadette Peters singing and dancing on stage, our mutually (actor/spectator) created fictional character of Annie Oakley in the fictional world of the musical, Bernadette’s creation of Annie’s creation of the fictional persona “Annie Oakley,” and an occasional ecstatic nod to Bernadette’s celebrity which made us all excited to be experiencing this musical with her. Finally there is no denying the Sensory experience of watching Bernadette Peters as a fascinating, working, breathing human being and hoping to make eye contact with her. Celebrity adds a second level of fiction: the fictional narrative of the performer’s context in society or culture, and in a conspiratorial way both the actor and the spectator are the audience for that celebrity fiction. It can be additive – as when the fictive celebrity persona enhances the creation of the fictional character with an overlaying of attributes that are appropriate to the character such as Bernadette Peters to Annie Oakley (spunky, tender, talented), or it can create a “fatal collision” to advance the metaphor used by Quinn. This happened with the inclusion of a celebrity, Liza Minnelli, in the Kander and Ebb musical, *The Rink*, (1984). Kander describes the audience’s rejection of Minnelli, “She played a dumpy, shlumpy, fat girl; she had one costume. She was fabulous, but the audience did not want

to see her be that way. They wanted to see her be Liza Minnelli – and the critics did too” (qtd. in Bryer, Davison 109). Celebrity can heighten the spectator sense of self-importance especially in the Sensory level of communication as described above. It also raises the stakes of live performance. This is not the place to enter into the debate between the privileging of “live” over “mediated” performance, but typically the phenomenological arguments for live performance are related to communicative actions that are part of the spectator-actor relationship: the proximity of live actors to the live spectator, the sense of immediacy, the possibility of something going wrong, the sense that it is a one-off event never to be repeated, and that possibility of failure or success is as dependent on the audience performance as much as it is on the actor’s performance. The internet is full of YouTube videos boasting of a spectator’s attendance at a celebrity performance or, even more noteworthy, capturing a one of a kind moment when a celebrity steps out of character to address a poorly behaved fan. Just before closing night, Patti Lupone, in the 2008 revival of *Gypsy*, stopped part way through “Rose’s Turn” to stop an audience member from taking a picture. “Stop taking pictures right now,” Lupone was captured on a YouTube audio as saying. “We have forgotten our public manners. And we have forgotten that we are in a community.” A closer examination of “Rose’s Turn” from *Gypsy* may be helpful to conclude this section by reiterating how musical theatre excitement is generated when the actor-spectator “keys” shift as phenomenologist Bert O. State’s put it at the beginning of our discussion or when they tightly interweave and build on each other as Sauter would suggest. In his memoir, *Mainly on Directing*, Arthur Laurents, who was the book writer for *Gypsy* and later directed it three times, discusses how the original intent of the plot was for Louise to enter immediately after “Rose’s Turn,” applauding Rose herself. Dramatically this had the effect of stepping on the audience’s applause since they were aware that the action was moving on. While the show was

in previews in Philadelphia, Oscar Hammerstein counseled that “Ethel [Merman] wasn’t getting the applause the audience had been waiting all night to give her; and because they had been waiting in vain, they were frustrated and didn’t listen to the last scene” (qtd. in Laurents 32). With some re-writing and star wrangling the scene was changed and the ending worked: Ethel got her applause, the show was a huge success; spectators and star were happy. Laurents, however, was not happy that the bow and the “show-stopping” applause took the audience out of the fiction. Later when he directed the show with Angela Lansbury in London he wanted to fix the ending. What he came up with is one of the most exciting examples of character/actor/spectator blends in musical theatre history. As described by Laurents:

The stage is ablaze with ROSE in huge lights. There’s a huge spotlight on Rose as she bows to thunderous applause, even cheers . . . And bows again. The spot goes with her as she moves to one side and bows again. Then the ROSE lights begin to drop out. She bows again. Now the ROSE lights are gone and the stage lights is diminishing. Still she bows again. Only her spot is left now; the applause is dying out. Her spot is reduced to a dim glow. A work light comes on; the applause peters out, then ends – but not for Rose: she still hears it. She takes a slow, deep regal bow to deathly silence – and at that moment the audience gets it: there never was any applause for Rose; it was all in her head. (Laurents 34)

Having tested some of the actor/spectator actions with musical theatre examples, we can now we turn to devising an actor-spectator model for analysis of a musical theatre performance – as a way of capturing the communication levels in the “eventness” of the event. We can see that due to the prevalence of physical, encoded/conventional, artistic, community building actions found in musical theatre, we will have a more complex model amplifying some of the elements from other models, reducing other elements. From “double consciousness’ we now have a multiplicity of consciousnesses, and also more layers of liminality where modes overlap or comment on each other. Also we should note that within each mode is a range of actions, which should not be considered as aesthetic evaluations for the overall success of the performance, but

rather as options within performance for communication. Some possible, but not all, choices are suggested below.

Actor/Spectator Communicative Actions in Performance for Musical Theatre

CELEBRITY

Celebrity enhances interest

Fictional narrative of celebrity
Adds enhanced layers of meaning

Celebrity distracting in role
Celebrity lacks needed artistic ability

SENSORY/Exhibitory

Awareness of physical body of actor

Actor's body commands attention and interest

Actor's body rejects gaze (self consciousness or displeasing)

ARTISTIC/Expressive/Encoded

Ability appropriate to genre

Authenticity of artistry
Emotional expression

incapable
of demands of role

PERFORMATIVE/Representational

Creates fictional character with spectator

Communicates intentions and emotions
Connects with other actors

Is not connected with other characters, actions are random or unmotivated

WE/Collaborative/Community

Spectator is recognized within the world of the actor

No separation between actor's world and that of the audience

No break in fourth wall, but recognition of audience in "WE" songs

We have discussed throughout this section how important the actor – spectator relationship is and have suggested that this concept and the various models created to identify elements in this relationship from cognitive spectating, phenomenology, the theatrical event, and semiotics can also be applied to the actor –spectator relationship in musical theatre. The intersections of these theories with musical theatre examples have shown that it is the dynamic oscillation between modes that creates a rich, more memorable, and multi-layered performance experience. From the various models discussed I have identified key elements that pertain to the aspirations and intentions of musical theatre as entertainment, artistry, narrative and community. Now we will take our theory “on the road” and explore how it augments a performance analysis that tries to stay strictly in the “event-ness” of the moment. Two types of analyses will be constructed. First, a historical performance construction seeking to interrogate the factors that pushed the musical *Oklahoma!* from a troubled out-of-town tryout to a paradigm shifting sensation and then a contemporary performance analysis using the communicative actor-spectator actions model to discuss two musical theatre productions currently on Broadway: *The Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess*, and *Godspell*. Throughout these analyses we will be asking these questions (some based on the work of Sauter): in musical theatre does switching from artistic appreciation of the actor to involvement in the fictional world create greater engagement from the spectator? By distinguishing between modes it is possible to understand how certain performers create an atmosphere of mounting tension with the spectator? At some point does a qualitative change in the performer-spectator relationship take place which transforms the spectator’s interest into an emotional participation in the fictional world of the stage, or does a Celebrity mode, which possibly interrupts the narrative flow, create excitement? How is the WE/Community mode activated? Is there a hierarchy of modes, i.e., the Artistic/Expressive

mode over the Performative/Representational or is it the switching between these worlds that creates musical theatre magic?

CHAPTER IV

Away We Go! to Oklahoma!

It is tempting from nearly seventy years of distance to make the mistake of viewing the creation of a landmark musical such as *Oklahoma!* as somehow being inevitable, artless and intentionally springing from its inception with a certain, well defined and preconceived world view by its authors. But in fact, some of what we consider defining moments in this musical, even in a thematic sense, were last minute, possibly frantic, changes born from an understanding of the theatrical needs of the show rather than a concerted effort to create a landmark and make history. In his extensively researched study, *Oklahoma! The Making of the American Musical*, author Tim Carter describe the “complex collaborative processes, and even crisis management, that led, haphazardly or not, to a seemingly well-rounded a result. . . [I]n the months after the premiere, Rodgers and Hammerstein were anxious to explain just how much hard work and strong theatrical experience had gone into the show, counterbalancing earlier press accounts of the ease and routine nature of their collaboration” (173).

Of course the audience was part of the process of creation, too. *Oklahoma!* (under various titles) had two out-of-town tryouts, first in New Haven and then in Boston. As discussed earlier the out-of-town tryout continues to be a standard way musicals are tested and adapted in front of active spectators. This chapter will apply the actor-spectator relationship terms developed in the last chapter to an historical event, specifically to an event that has been deemed extremely

influential in the development of musical theatre: the Boston out-of-town reception of the musical, *Oklahoma!* Very specifically we will be considering the staging and performance of the title song. I chose this particular theatrical event for examination because it is well-known and historically documented, and for many it is remembered as a spectacular moment in musical theatre. Studies on the memories of spectators, as we have discussed, suggest that “affective approval postpones the moment of forgetting, whereas disinterest anticipates it . . . and the astonishing survival of memories of older shows appears to be linked to majority audience approval” (Deldime & Pigeon 7). My point here is not to debate “who remembers what” but to suggest that the vividness with which special moments can be recalled suggests both their importance to the shows they were in and their importance to the audience’s experience of that show. Scott McMillen recalls in his book, *The Musical as Drama*, his memory of the staging of this number which stood out in his experience of seeing *Oklahoma!*: “I am recalling the downstage move of the original production, which was a defining moment” (85). It is relevant to this discussion to stop at this point and figure out what we are looking at here and what we are not looking at. I will provide a detailed description to help the reader visualize this moment of performance and will contextualize it both in how it was created and where it occurs within its show. This approach to performance analysis will include both *reportage* and *historical reconstruction*. Theatre theorist Patrice Pavis describes *analysis as reportage* as akin to a live sports reporter who would,

Comment on the development of a performance as it unfolds, as in a soccer match, indicating what is happening on stage between the “players,” clarifying the strategies employed, recording the result, “goals” scored by opposing team. This would entail dealing with the performance from within, in the heat of the action: reproducing the detail and impact of events, directly experiencing everything that moves the spectator at the actual moment of performance, determining its *punctum*, the ways in which the spectator is emotionally and cognitively implicated in the dynamics of the acting, the ripples of meaning and sensations generated by the multiplicity and simultaneity of signs. (Pavis 9)

Historical reconstruction, which is more widely used by theatre scholars “collects pieces of evidence, relics, or documents pertaining to a performance, as well as artists’ statements of their intentions written during the performance’s preparation. . . and is particularly concerned with the study of performance’s contexts [. . .].” (Pavis 11). This type of analysis in musical theatre frequently results in an interrogation of the “text” (printed libretto) and not the “performance,” with the goal of understanding from a “sociosemiotic perspective” (Pavis 11). My goal, instead, is to examine, with historical input, what is going on between the stage and spectator that packs such a punch in this moment. Phenomenologists would call these visceral moments. My discussion will attempt to focus on the “eventness” and phenomenological impact rather than the final cultural reading. With this approach, we will focus on the actor/spectator relationship: the “fish” instead of the “fishbowl,” and look for how this shifts in this relationship adding or subtracting to the theatrical reception. This type of historical approach, focusing on the cognitive engagement of the audience and not the cultural or material history of the production is one of the methods suggested for further consideration and development for theatre historians by Bruce McConachie in the Epilogue in *Engaging Spectators* (2008: 185). James Johnson, who followed a similar phenomenological approach to an historical study of the cognitive understanding of music in his book *Listening In Paris*, which traces the evolution of audience silence in the concert halls and opera houses of Paris, argues that understanding the processes of the spectator is just as important as that of understanding the artist. “The popular comprehension of new aesthetic styles stands for more than just artistic innovation. It signifies the emergence and refinement of new modes of perception” (Johnson 3). By putting myself and the reader in the shoes or seats of the audience and using a careful sifting of the evidence with attention to the

probable blend intended by the creators and performers we can try to re-create the likely impact on spectators of the time.

In *Oklahoma! The Making of the American Musical*, author Tim Carter suggests that a chorus member had the initial thought to include members of the chorus in the singing and staging of the second act title song, particularly in adding their voices in harmony. Carter quotes the reaction to this suggestion by Celeste Holm, who was the original Ado Annie, “At that time, the number “Oklahoma!” was being sung mainly by Curly and Laurey, and we were all calling for more excitement at this part of the play. Dick [Rodgers] immediately conceived the idea of using the entire chorus for the number with explosive effect” (qtd. in Carter 162). As the story goes, the orchestrator, Robert Russell Bennett, reworked the song for harmonization on the train ride up from New York and tried it out with the cast on their Sunday day off after the first week of try-out performances in Boston (Carter 162). After they learned the new harmonies around the piano the cast moved to the stage where according to Carter, “Agnes de Mille came up with the ‘flying wedge,’ a V-shaped formation as the cast moved from the rear of the stage to the footlights. The reworking was used in the show for the second week in Boston and was a show-stopper: at long last . . . Rodgers and Hammerstein had found their eleven o’clock number” (163). In other accounts, director Rouben Mamoulian, who had not gotten along well with Hammerstein, Rodgers, or de Mille, is credited with the staging. Frederick Nolan, in *The Sound of Their Music* (2002), describes the staging as the “whole cast together in one long chorus line stretching from stage left to stage right. They threw the song out to the audience, culminating in a rousing, mounting crescendo . . . Yeeeoww!!!!” (Nolan 21). Regardless of who deserves the credit, the re-working of the number created tremendous theatrical excitement and affected the

overall reception of the show. In *OK! The Story of Oklahoma*, Max Wilk quotes *Oklahoma!*

conductor Jay Blackton's description of when the new staging was introduced for the first time:

The first night we did it I was conducting, and so I couldn't see the audience behind me, but I certainly could *hear* them. They went wild! The number stopped the show, dead. The applause was so great that first time we did it that right after the performance Dick came to me and we decided to establish an encore chorus of the song [. . .] (qtd. in Wilk 203, author's emphasis)

What was the spectator experiencing and what made this moment so exciting? The first act of *Oklahoma!* introduced a new form of integration of songs and book that placed most of the focus of the action on other actors, rather than out to the audience. This meant that the intention of the actors was unusually high in the PERFORMATIVE/Representational mode. The result was to draw the audience into the fictional world of the play. In casting *Oklahoma!* Rodgers and Hammerstein purposely avoided casting musical theatre "stars" because they wanted the *story* to stand out rather than individual actors. Wilks quotes The Guild Theatre producer, Theresa Helburn, about the casting process: "Our intent was to discover *actors* who could sing. The leading parts must be played by actors with dramatic talent, plus the unusual combination of an attractive singing voice. That's how we ended up with a cast of people most of whom were fresh to musical comedy" (qtd. in Wilks 128 author's emphasis)! In addition, the music and lyrics were of a new, idiomatic quality, more similar to "plain speech" than typically found in musical theatre showtunes. In the *Tulane Drama Review* (1958), theatre scholar James T. Nardin describes some of the striking innovations the Boston out-of-town audience may have encountered:

The audience lulled into romanticism by the strings of the pit orchestra – what a surprise they were after two decades of blasting brass – and by the desire to escape the wartime world of 1943 was ready to accept the lyricism with which *Oklahoma*[!] began. The stage was unnaturally bright; the cornfield backdrop was somewhat stylized. Curly, a cowboy of a past era (when sentiment was perhaps more openly admitted), overflowed with high spirits at the beautiful morning and the beautiful feeling he had. The

vocabulary range was limited – studiously so – but the vernacular directness of the lyric was convincing because it expressed the buoyancy most of us have felt when the day seemed especially ideal. Had he spoken the idea, he would have had to restrict himself to a laconic “Nice day” in order to seem normal and credible; but when he finished singing “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’” an unembarrassed audience was convinced that no other way could be found to describe that particular morning in Oklahoma. (25)

From the opening acappella number, the audience was aware that this was a new type of presentation in musical theatre. The director, Rouben Mamoulian, had studied as a teenager under Vakhtangov at the Moscow Art Theatre and had emigrated to the United States while in his twenties. According to Mark Grant in *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical*, while at the Eastman School of Music, Mamoulian “directed opera singers using Stanislavsky’s method with a concentration on inner dramatic truth” (Grant 238). As a director of musical theatre Mamoulian was unique in that he, as director, staged the large musical numbers instead of relying on the choreographer. Grant notes that, “Mamoulian outdid Wayburn, Berkeley, and all other previous rhythmically savvy stage directors of musicals by holistically interweaving music, rhythm, blocking, and the ‘beats’ of the scene (in actors’, not musical, parlance) to create a sculpture-in-motion that was not merely superficially exciting but expressive of the psychological subtext” (239). Jan Clayton, a cast member from the original production of *Carousel*, also directed by Mamoulian, commented on his unique (for that time period) way of working with the chorus: “His direction is a very personal thing because to him each member of the cast is an individual performer. He handles large groups magnificently because he acknowledges no ‘chorus’ per se. Each performer, whose name he knows early on, is directed specifically to have a personality and purpose all his own” (qtd. in Grant 240). When Mamoulian signed on to direct *Oklahoma!* for the Theatre Guild he did so only if his contract specified he could “direct the whole production and all its elements” (qtd. in Grant 239). In addition to directing musicals, Mamoulian had directed the stage plays *Porgy* and *Marco*

Millions for the Theatre Guild as well as directing several movies in Hollywood. Mamoulian's work in *Oklahoma!* clearly offered something new for the spectator: a psychologically motivated and directed musical. Grant acknowledges Mamoulian's, unsung contribution to the "stylistic revolution of the integrated musical. . . . Before Mamoulian, the performance of songs in a revue or musical comedy was presentational and extraneous; the singer would come to the footlights and sing, stopping the action and standing a part from it like a nightclub performer" (Grant 238).

In contrast to this presentational standard, songs in *Oklahoma!* advanced the story and were frequently started from spoken dialogue, not a long musical buildup. As Carter notes, during much of the first act there is "extensive use of spoken dialogue over music to provide some kind of continuity through the action, and also to 'ooze' between speech and song" (104). The lively "Kansas City" song and dance by Will Parker includes ARTISTIC/Expressive action, especially when the actor who plays Will lets loose after dancing with the "tuckered" Aunt Eller and really shows what he can do. However, the intention of Will's performance is for the *onstage* audience of Aunt Eller and the boys who ad lib, "Let's sit down and watch" (Hammerstein 7). The big number which closes the first act is the "Dream Ballet" also known as "Laurey makes up her mind." This begins with the song, "Out of My Dreams" which Laurey sings with and to her girlfriends. Like the vocal music, this dance number is intended to further the story and speaks to Laurey's psychological state in deciding between Curly and Jud. The "Dream Ballet" presents the only opportunity in *Oklahoma!* for a "traditional chorus girl" look (and skimpy costuming) in that it includes three dance-hall girls who represent the "girlie" photos Laurey has seen tacked on Jud's wall. However, the "satirically bawdy" dance these girls perform is for the benefit of "dream Jud" and other men. (Hammerstein 29). The "Dream Ballet" ends ominously with "dream Laurey" giving herself to "dream Jud" in order to save "dream

Curley.” The final moments of Act One following the ballet show the real Jud physically controlling and exiting with the real Laurey, while the real Curley watches in puzzlement and defeat. Throughout the first Act of the musical and especially in the ballet, the actor/character blend has been unusually weighted heavily on the PERFORMATIVE/Representational, although comic numbers, like Ado Annie’s “I Cain’t Say No” are reminiscent of musical comedy and create an ARTISTIC/Expressive/Encoded connection.

The above descriptions are offered to give a sense of the temporal progress of the play to an audience and to contextualize the moment in the process of a performance rather than in isolation. It is important to feel the sum of the little bits that have proceeded as we approach the event in question. So far the actions on stage have been intentionally focused on the fictional story and interactions between characters, and the indeterminacy of Laurey’s actions and intentions has, perhaps, created more audience empathy and identification with Curly who has less ambiguous motives and actions. Act Two begins with the diegetic song and dance number “The Farmer and the Cowman” followed by a dramatic scene where Curly sells all the objects of his cowboy livelihood, his horse, saddle and gun in order to have enough cash to be the highest bidder for Laurey’s hamper. Other story points start happening quickly. Right after the comic duet “All or Nuthin” between Will and Ado Annie, which tries to define the terms of their relationship, Laurey comes to terms with her relationship with Jud and insultingly fires him. Laurey and Curly are quickly engaged and shortly thereafter Ado Annie finally sends off Ali Hakim and settles down with Will. It should be noted that this scene between Ado Annie, Ali Hakim and Will is probably the “schtikiest” in the musical. Ali, becomes part vaudeville comedian with his repeated “Persian Goodbyes” and Will, cast as the straight-man here, gets the final “ba-da-bing” with his “Oklahoma Hello.” (At one point Theresa Helburn, one of the

producers from The Theatre Guild, had wanted to cast Groucho Marx as Ali Hakim.) This little bit of theatrical “business” is performed in a front-of-the traveler scene, and, although still within the fiction of the musical, possibly primes the audience to fully embrace the turn the musical will take next. As the scene opens we see Laurey and Curley at Aunt Eller’s house in wedding garb joining the community in a celebration of their marriage. The full company, minus Ali Hakim and Jud, are onstage sitting at tables or standing in groups. We see the realistic convention of Laurey tossing her wedding bouquet over her shoulder to a group of women as the orchestra underscores of “People Will Say We’re in Love,” reminding us of how far she’s come from the first act. Curly is good-naturedly joshed by Ike and Laurey about saying his ‘I do.’ The orchestra begins a new musical refrain, lively and strongly bouncy on the beat. In almost recitative style Aunt Eller, Ike and Laurey sing about Curly and Laurey’s new status as farmer and wife (note both a change in livelihood and marital status for Curly), and Curly equates their new “state” of life with the land, “Soon be livin’ in a brand new state.” The chorus repeats the salient part of this phrase, “Brand new state,” and adds the qualifier, “gonna treat you great!” Named members of the community continue this discussion by singing to each other about all the things they’ll have in this new “state”: starting with the literal: “barley, carrots, pertaters;” moving to the descriptive: “prairie where the June bugs zoom” extending to the abstract: “plen’y of heart and plen’y of hope.” As soon as Aunt Eller sings the word “hope,” an ascending musical line in the orchestra begins and Curly stands and matches the top note of this line with the start of the refrain that he sings first as a solo. “Ohhhhh-kla-ho-ma!” The onstage community has finally come together and the cast’s attention begins to shift to include the audience in that community. The character Curly, shorn of his constructed image of cowboy by the sale of his horse, saddle, gun and marriage to Laurie is now more interesting to us in the SENSORY and

ARTISTIC modes as a Singer/actor rather than the character blended actor who has given up the identity we created with him. The music is catchy, in two, like a Sousa march. Curly's voice is describing a land for both the individual "my honey lamb and I" but also the wider community, including the audience --"we know we belong to the land"-- and as he reaches the end of the refrain a joyful eruption of confirmation is produced by the chorus, "Yeow! A-yip-i-o-ee-ay!" which Curly affirms, "You're doin' fine, Oklahoma! Oklahoma, O.K.!" The lyric has not advanced the story or revealed new character. What it does do, however, is transform the fictional state into a theatrical one. We hear again the rising notes of the orchestra and anticipate the refrain beginning a second time. This time the chorus joins in with a "special and stirring" (as noted in the stage directions of the 1943 libretto) vocal arrangement including harmonies and counter melodies. Particularly exciting is the soprano line that sweeps across the melody just as the lyric has the "wind sweeping 'cross the plain." In the original production the chorus assembles in the flying wedge, a kind of upside down "V" with Curly and Laurey downstage center. The infectious enthusiasm of the singing is accompanied by the intentional movement of the entire cast down to the footlights, spreading themselves across like one big chorus line in a completely presentational motion. The final pose to the exuberant "Yeow!" at the end of the song includes Laurey and Curley reaching an arm forward to the audience, with the rest of the ensemble making a happy closed fist gesture either upwards or forward.



Fig. 3: The final “Yeow!” punctuating the end of the song “Oklahoma!”

The intention to the audience is unambiguously in the WE/Collaborative mode – we share this moment together. The audience, at this out-of-town tryout performance, enthusiastically responded to the actors’ intention. Phenomenologist Bert O. States discusses the power in the moment when gesture and speech come together in this intentional way for the actor and I think his analysis speaks well to this moment in *Oklahoma!*,

[P]henomenally one would perceive here only a single aural-visual event. It would not be a question of two languages coming together into a unity but of a single *motive* pervading the actor’s body and producing speech and movement which, so to speak, collapse in the body of [the] character. . . . Gesture is the process of revelation of the actor’s presence – in view of our earlier discussion one might say of his “usefulness” – and this presence, as the organ that feeds on the dramatic text, is the governing center of what is possible in theater.” (States, 138 author’s emphasis)

States adds that the power of the gesture resides in the actor, but the experience is found in the receiver. This turning point in the musical *Oklahoma!* fully engages the actors’ bodily presences and bids the audience’s bodily presence to be equally engaged in a moment of SENSORY

awareness of sharing the physical space. Theatre historian Andrea Most suggests that the “joyous applause that inevitably follows the number joins audience member and performers in the communal utopian vision of Rodger’s and Hammerstein’s America.” (107). I think, however, that the reaction is less studiously driven by ideology, than the actual physical and SENSORY awareness and enjoyment of becoming a community at that very moment in the theatre. Both a real and fictional (blend) of community has been co-constructed from the communicative actions between actor and spectator, and as Scott McMillan notes, this “number lets the audience join the performers in a moment of pure presence” (85).

The first out-of-town tryout, of *Away we Go!* (the first working title) in New Haven, had resulted in plenty of negative reviews over the new musical. Carter reports that the “opinions of the New York critics and their representatives who traveled up for the opening [in New Haven] were famously mixed, and the telegram sent to the feared syndicated columnist Walter Winchell – ‘No legs, no jokes, no chance’ soon entered the mythology” (159). Producer Theresa Helburn was forced to find new backers for the show when others reneged (Wilks 183). A weak second act continued to plague the musical. Attempts were made to create flashier dance routines, but they didn’t seem to fit the style of the show. Carter reports that dancer Eric Victor was featured in a specialty spot in “It’s a Scandal, It’s an Outrage,” by jumping out of a barrel in a cowboy costume and performing “his anti-gravitational antics, but his appearance was so unexpectedly frightening, that it took ten minutes before the audience would laugh again, and moreover it so hurt the production stylistically [...]” (156). At one point Rodgers and Hammerstein had considered writing in “Lotta,” a Spanish character who would sing a “barbaric Spanish song” with Ali Hakim, late in the second act (Carter 163). According to Carter, director Mamoulian, wanting to add more spectacle to the last scene in the show brought in an “honest to goodness

cowboy from Oklahoma who spun ropes. The idea was for the roper to spin his lasso around [Curly and Laurey] while they sang ‘Oklahoma,’ but the rope caught the singers, then in a separate attempt, Mamoulian himself, and the roper was unceremoniously dismissed.” (Carter 13). A second act song between Laurey and Curley, “Boys and Girls Like You and Me” was not working. Curly and Laurey were supposed to end the song with a kiss, while the ensemble picked up the refrain with each boy kissing his girl. Frederick Nolan, a biographer of Rodgers and Hammerstein, described Mamoulian’s attempt to fix this:

“I know the theeng weel feex thees,” Mamoulian said. “Pigeons! They weel go across the stage *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh!*” And the next evening, in the middle of the song, *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh!* The pigeons were released into the auditorium. As they circled and soared between the lights and the stage, throwing huge shadows, everyone froze. The orchestra stopped playing, the cast stopped singing – all except for Alfred Drake who soldiered resolutely on – and there was chaos. The number was cut that night. (20-21)

It took neither spectacle nor flying birds, nor featured dancers or exotic characters to make *Oklahoma!* a hit. What it took was an abrupt deviation from the PERFORMATIVE/Representational fictional world of the play with an actor-spectator relationship which had held the audience’s interest, but also held them slightly at bay, to an open WE/Collaborative mode and relationship which let the audience play a part in this new creation. To sum up, as an integrated musical, *Oklahoma!* showed a shift in dominance from ARTISTIC/encoded actions to a high level of PERFORMATIVE/Representational actions with its emphasis on strong acting skills for the actor/singer/chorus, intentional lack of CELEBRITY and a directorial style that prompted the actors’ communication to focus on each other rather than out to the audiences. Even the songs were performed in the PERFORMATIVE/Representational mode to advance the story of the musical. The SENSORY and ARTISTIC actions are subdued to the primary task of creating the fictional world and characters. With the song “Oklahoma!” a moment is created where the SENSORY and the WE

are allowed to burst through. Through this a density of “blends” is achieved which contributes to elevating the communicative power between actor and spectator to the physical creation of community.

Following that fateful day early in the Boston tryout when the new staging of the title song was added, Hammerstein wrote to his son Bill:

[I]n one night we suddenly took on the aura of a hit. People have come up from NYC and are swooning. I now believe that here is the nearest approach to *Show Boat* that the theatre has attained. . . . All this is said in hope that a handful of beer-stupefied critics may not decide that we have tried to write a musical comedy and failed. If they see that this is different and higher in its intent, they should rave. (qtd. in Carter 166)

The musical which ultimately became *Oklahoma!* struggled in its out-of-town tryout in New Haven under the title *Away We Go!* Still wrestling with a weak second act, the title changed to *Oklahoma* when it started its Boston try-out. Following the addition of the new staging to the title song Hammerstein wrote to his son, “The name of the show is now *Oklahoma!*, a good honest title” (qtd. in Carter 166). “It gave the show a punctuation,” Wilks quotes orchestra conductor Blackton as saying. “A real exclamation point. In fact, I’m certain that’s where the exclamation point in the title came from – that same excitement we’d generated” (qtd. in Wilks 203). For our discussion it is the *punctum* in the picture of the reception of *Oklahoma!*

Chapter V

Actor-Spectator Analyses in Performance

This chapter will apply the actor-spectator model developed in Chapter Three to two live musical theatre performances: *The Gershwin's Porgy and Bess* (hereafter called *Porgy and Bess*) and *Godspell*. This type of live performance analysis will focus on the communicative theatrical actions of the actors and the effect that these actions produce in the audience.

Although the surveyed spectator is simply me, I will try to include reactions that are both peculiarly mine, but also those that express the general sense of the audience, especially during times of emotional contagion. I would characterize my spectatorship as similar to most musical theatre audience members in that I am a willing and enthusiastic attendee. My experience in musical theatre can be considered an advantage in the same way empirical performance scholar Peter Eversmann describes in *Theatrical Events: Borders Dynamics* (2004), how they began the process of quantitative surveys about the experience of a theatrical event his research group using experts, or at least theatre practitioners and educators, who might be able to describe more freely their response or at least “tend to be quite conscious of the their own reactions towards performances and [have] the ability to articulate and analyze their own, subjective experiences in a coherent manner” (149).

Although I will note active spectating awareness of moments of empathy, memory, and theatrical actions, this analysis will focus on being in the event and will not be a critique of the

“text” of the work or a consideration of the performance as located within a specific cultural frame or aesthetic value. That type of scholarship has been done in many interesting essays by other theatre scholars. Instead, I want to take a fresh look at viewing musical theatre through the frame of the live and frequently changing actor-spectator relationship. As David Saltz writes in *Staging Philosophy* (2006), “Theater survives in an age of film and video precisely because the reality of the theater event matters. An audience comes to the theater to experience a real event, to see real, flesh-and-blood actors perform real actions” (qtd. in Krasner & Saltz 203).

By distinguishing between the modes of actions defined in an earlier chapter: CELEBRITY, SENSORY, ARTISTIC, PERFORMATIVE, and WE and suggesting what meaning they produce in the spectator I will interrogate if a spectator’s awareness and oscillation between different modes creates greater interest and excitement in the production and if the reception of these creates a meta-narrative that is found only in the performance and not the text. Will there be significant moments from these modes that will last in my memory or moments of communication that exist only in performance and not in the script? Two other questions I will be considering are: are there unexpected WE moments, and what happens when attention is placed on the materiality of the actors’ bodies? So as to not privilege the text over the performance, I will not be referring to any printed text or libretto, but only what was experienced in the live performance. I will try to provide a useful blend of performance synopsis and analysis. Some sequences may be described in more detail than others.

The Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess, The Richard Rodgers Theatre, New York City
2:00 p.m. matinee, February 4, 2012
Row F on right orchestra

The lush music of George Gershwin was washing over the curb and lobby of the Richard Rodgers Theatre on 46th street when I arrived. Typical of Broadway houses my seat was tight,

but cozy, placed about 8 rows away from the stage on the far right of the orchestra. The Saturday matinee audience seemed to share my anticipation and was quite full, possibly due to the 30% discount on tickets prices available at the TKTS booth nearby. A full scrim concealed the world of the musical from view and effectively acted like a grand drape. The scrim blazed the words “Porgy and Bess.” The lights dimmed and in a WE action the orchestra indicated that the performance was starting and commanded our silence and attention. I had not seen *Porgy and Bess* before, nor was I familiar with any but the “hit songs” but could tell from the overture that the music would be richly complex and emotional. As a visual focal point the scrim changed color several times during the overture. As the stage lights come up and the scrim rises, we see a setting of a courtyard. The set is neither highly representational nor abstract but an evocative, interesting textural blend of horizontal plywood, metal window frames, and glass windows in a half-circular presentation meant to suggest a courtyard or public space in an area of close living quarters. Material elements onstage include an upstage water pump and a number of picnic baskets. The program denotes this setting as Catfish Row in the late 1930’s.

What are the first impressions of meeting the actors/characters? At rise, the Gershwin classic song, “Summertime,” is sung by a young mother to the “baby” held in her arms while other members of the community congregate nearby. This song, most likely familiar to many spectators, is sung very simply, as a lullaby. This first moment creates many layers of cognition and relationship: the memory of hearing that song in other contexts; appreciation of the artistry, but restrained simplicity of the actor’s voice; and the tentative construction of the fictional relationship of this mother to her baby and to the community. On a SENSORY level I am aware that this is a good looking group of people. The men look strong and are handsome, the women are attractive. Their costumes blend in a harmonious and subdued color palette. Women have on

dresses, with fitted bodices and full skirts and working class aprons. Men have on dungarees and sleeveless shirts revealing muscles, brawny bodies; some arms glistening with sweat although the heat is not dramatized. I become aware of the relationship of an actor to this mother and baby by his action of taking the baby and singing to it as the father. We are attracted to another actor with expressive eyes and a beautiful voice who jokingly brandishes a huge cotton bale hook. The next song, much livelier than “Summertime,” “A Woman Is a Sometime Thing” is performed by the father of the baby and is then picked up by the ensemble who suggest through the lyrics that there is a “men’s time,” when they are allowed to play after work. This actor/father, who we will come to know as Joshua/Jake, has an engaging, exhibitory manner with the audience and artistically exciting singing and dancing skills. His song can be viewed as an action introducing several important aspects: it is the first big musical number involving the whole ensemble and thus underlines the genre as musical theatre where people will sing and dance; in the lyrics it sets up a mildly adversarial position between men and women; and it initiates a recurring intra-theatrical device in the musical composition which juxtaposes men and women in melodic counterpoint which emphasizes their differing points of view. We see that the community is divided by gender roles through the separation of men and women in the dancing and singing of this song. At the end of this first big song and dance number the actors hold their pose – freeze – for applause. This is an encoded action appropriate for musical theatre, but this action also creates a WE opportunity for the spectator to give back. I was struck by how this also creates an opportunity for the spectator to be aware of the physical presence of the actor’s bodies which are breathing heavily after vigorous dancing. So far the dominant modes of the actor-spectator relationship have been the SENSORY and ARTISTIC.

Something changes when Porgy, the crippled beggar, enters. The actor, Norm Lewis, gets a brief recognition of applause at his entrance. Clearly some spectators recognize him from other productions. With his engaging physical presence and his warm, rich singing voice and the notable reaction of the onstage community in relationship to him, the construction of the fictional world begins to appear. I would like to be able to say why this happened, but it seemed to happen in an instant. Was it his crippled walk – the first real “acting” or intentional disguise of the body that we had seen so far? His costume indicated a status of poverty, but still harmonized with those of the other actors. Was it the emotion and intention of the other actors who include him in their onstage community? Did he fill an absence that we didn’t know was there? Soon after Porgy’s entrance, Bess, as played by musical theatre star, Audra MacDonald enters. She, too, gets round of applause of recognition and we initially engaged with her in the CELEBRITY mode. The contrast between the celebrity of MacDonald and the character of Bess is great. We are aware that Bess lacks the agency that Macdonald as celebrity and artist has. The character Bess, as performed by MacDonald is a cocaine addict and prostitute, clearly at odds with this community and seemingly at odds with herself. In a low cut, red dress Bess stands out from the others of the community. For a long while the Audra/Bess character is inscrutable, we can’t read her intentions, we can only feel her fear and jumpiness, yet there is an authenticity in the SENSORY awareness of Audra/Bess. Although we can’t figure out who Bess is, we are fascinated with a material awareness of MacDonald’s body moving on the stage: squatting to watch the game of craps, snorting cocaine, itching her arms, shielding her wandering distracted eyes, bending down to fix her shoe in mid-stride. I am aware of thinking that we are unable to see through Bess’s eyes because Audra/Bess doesn’t want to acknowledge the audience yet.

With these additions of Porgy, Bess and Crown (a rugged Stevedore who enters with Bess) the action of the plot begins to move forward. Through a fight caused by a craps game, Crown kills the actor with the expressive eyes and good voice by stabbing him with the cotton hook. Crown flees; Porgy takes Bess into his home. The next scene is in the parlor room at the wake of the killed man, now identified as Robbins, and concerns the effort of his widow, Serena, to raise enough money to bury him. Porgy enters this home with Bess who is only barely tolerated by the community because she is with Porgy. Two Detectives enter to interrogate the group about the killing of Robbins. They abuse Joshua/Jake and try to force him to confess. Noticeably, the Detectives have no music in this performance. It is as if the orchestra is telling us that they will not support these characters; they are not part of the community of Catfish Row. Serena sings “My Man’s Gone Now,” which convincingly ties her emotional pain to the artistic work of singing the challenging operatic music. As a performance piece, *Porgy and Bess* has hovered in a musical theatre/opera liminal space. The operatic/aria style of music, typically not conventional to musical theatre, could be a distraction to a Broadway audience, but in this production, vocal melisma feels emotionally driven, not technical. In fact the complexity of the music heightens the spectator’s awareness of the character’s need to empty herself of emotion. Following Serena’s outpouring, Audra/Bess (inexplicably to me) begins to quietly sing “Leaving for the Promised Land” which the others join. This song’s action has layers of encoding as the kind of spiritual, “waiting for a better world” call and response message of comfort or endurance in the face of turmoil, and in the fictional world begins to assimilate Audra/Bess into the community.

The following scene picks up the action a month later. Jake and three of the other fisherman are preparing for work as they sing, “It’s Takes a Long Pull.” This song, which feels

like it might have been performed in “One” in an older style of staging, is performed far downstage left, very near to me. As they are singing, one of the sailors is fiddling with fishing net. The handling of this prop activates the SENSORY mode and I am aware of his physicality and the reality of his holding the net. This is also a fine artistic moment with the four men blending their voices and intention as both a musical theatre quartet and as characters familiar with each other through their shared labor. There is a physical authenticity from the fishing net that transfers to their body. The materiality of the props in this production is worth noting. Once a prop is introduced it has a causal effect on the action and the characters. The cotton hook held by Robbins becomes the cause of his death. The baby held by Nikki/Clara becomes a symbol of respectability for Audra/Bess, the brace and knife held by Porgy will be used violently, the cocaine ensnares Audra/Bess, the fishing net will be a cause of the death of Jake. The handling of these very real objects creates an acute SENSORY awareness of the actor.

Norm/Porgy enters and sings about his new sense of happiness. “I Got Plenty of Nuthin’” is sung both to the community and to the audience as Porgy stands downstage center facing the audience. It is one of those interesting WE songs that include the audience in his worldview without necessarily breaking the fourth wall. We believe that he has plenty of “Nuthin’” to share with us. The character, Mariah, is constructed as the community matriarch when she takes on flashy Sportin’ Life in the song, “I Hates Your Strutting Style,” and condemns him for selling cocaine.

There is some business with an attempt to secure a divorce for Audra/Bess from the evil Crown so that she would be free to be Porgy’s woman, but what happens next is one of those transforming moments of live theatre. When Porgy seats Audra/Bess on his lap and sings to her “Bess, You Is My Woman Now,” she timidly begins to look at him and we can see with her

when she actually begins to *see* him. This moment creates a paradigm shift in the world of the musical when we experience that Bess/Audra can finally look at something that is safe for her. Prior to this moment, she had been like a restless animal, defensive, agitated, creating an impenetrable character. Audra/Bess is finally able to relax and the audience is able to, too and this allows us to empathize with and construct “Bess.” Porgy encourages Bess to go to the church picnic that the community is preparing for which will be held on a nearby island. She wants him to go too, but he has to remain behind to get a new brace that will help him walk better. The first act ends with this tentative new opportunity for greater assimilation of Bess into the community and the community’s anticipation of the picnic with the rousing and festive ensemble musical number, “I Can’t Sit Down.” At this moment, I couldn’t help but think of the musical, *Carousel*, which also concludes the first act with the anticipation of the community for a festive event.

The mood of the audience at intermission is upbeat and positive. Although there is an extremely long line for the woman’s restroom, the line moves quickly and one fellow audience member comments, “This is just like a Disneyland ride line.”

Act Two begins, as customary, with the lights dimming and the orchestra silencing the spectators once again. The Entr’acte is comprised of Porgy’s music, “I Got Plenty of Nuthin’” and “Bess You is My Woman Now” reminding us of the important developments in Act One and highlighting the relationship between Porgy and Bess. The second act begins on the island where the community is enjoying the picnic. The ensemble dances exuberantly to a drumbeat and the action is SENSORY AND ARTISTIC as we see their bodies in motion. For most of the number the device of the separation of men and women in the dance is used, however, when the dancing turns to male/female pairs, Clara and Jake stand out as the “lead” couple. Bess is

partnered with Mariah in the dance which indicates not only her acceptance into the community, but also her willing conformity to its norms. The showman, David/Sportin' Life, entertains the assembled crowd with his rousing mixture of biblical and cultural views in an ARTISTIC and conventional song, "It Ain't Necessarily So," which recalls memories of other second act crowd pleasing songs with biblical references like "Sit Down Your Rocking the Boat" (*Guys and Dolls*, 1951). In the background, during the action of this musical number, we see Bess being given the opportunity to hold Clara's baby and this development of her tentative emotional attachment as a caregiver, perhaps for the first time, pulls the spectator back into the fiction of the story.

Out of this warm sense of community, however, comes a disturbing plot direction. Bess, who has lagged behind the group, is confronted by Crown who wants her. There is a palpable feeling of concern from the audience when Crown appears. He's wild and disheveled, emanating a SENSORY sexual presence. There is no doubt of his intention to harm Bess. This sequence is lengthy and very physical between the two actors/characters. Although I could feel the audience willing Bess to escape from Crown, Bess is unable, possibly unwilling, to get away. He gets more and more aggressive in this scene which has as much intention for violence as an outright rape. The actor playing Crown is very physical with Audra/Bess's body and his physical presence against her is disturbing. When she ends the scene by running into the woods, knowing that Crown will follow and take her, there is no applause, so disturbing is the plot at this point. Although this sequence involved Bess and Crown singing the dramatic "What You Want with Bess?" the audience responded to the harrowing PERFORMATIVE emotions of the actor/characters and their SENSORY presence, not their ARTISTIC actions.

At this point there is no doubt that the SENSORY, ARTISTIC and PERFORMATIVE actions have been laid out to engage the spectator to pay attention to the fictional conflicts and

their significance within the plot. From this point in the musical the PERFORMATIVE actions dominate, except for a few fascinating moments which I will detail below.

The action returns to the mainland where Porgy is anxiously awaiting Bess's tardy return, trying to optimistically view her delay as allowing him to have more time to practice with his leg brace. Jake and the fisherman prepare to go to sea even though there is a storm brewing. Bess stumbles into this scene delirious and ill. Porgy is beside himself. Serena promises that she can heal Bess. She and the women remove Bess's dress (leaving her in a thin slip) and bathe her onstage with water from the pump as Serena sings, "Oh, Doctor Jesus." The materiality of the water and the actual bathing rivets the audience's attention. After washing Audra/Bess's body they lay her, still wet, under a quilt onstage and leave Porgy in attendance. This is one of those amazing theatrical moments when SENSORY, ARTISTIC, and PERFORMATIVE actions are happening simultaneously, creating many levels of relationships between the audience and the stage. One cannot remain unaffected by the physicality of Audra's body subjected to the water and public, exhibitory washing and we have genuine concern for her as an actor. Equally important, however, is the powerful authenticity and artistry of the music and the voice of Serena invoking a greater power to bring healing for Bess, the object of Porgy's emotional distress and concern, with whom we empathize. This is a highly memorable moment. When Bess awakens she and Porgy share a highly emotional duet returning to the intra-theatrical device of counterpoint music which highlights their differences, but also creates a thrilling resolution when they end the song by sharing the same melody. Bess confesses her weakness for Crown, but also her love for Porgy. Porgy assures Bess that he won't let Crown have her.

The orchestra alerts us to a storm brewing with dramatic music. As soon as Mariah assures Clara that it "couldn't possibly be that bad, they haven't heard the hurricane bell ring for

many years,” we hear the hurricane bell ring. The community assembles in Serena’s parlor, the sight of the wake in Act One; the scrim comes down partway to create a sense of claustrophobia and alarm. Clara is distraught when Jake doesn’t return with the other fisherman. In a very touching moment, Bess comforts and hugs Clara and her baby, indicating a maturing role for the assimilated Bess in the community. They sing together a reprise of “Summertime.” A metal piece is placed to board up the doorway on far stage right. In the height of the storm, Crown bursts through this door. Clara can no longer contain herself and runs to find Jake, giving her baby to Bess. Bess convinces Crown to run back into the storm to help Clara.

Now the soothing music from the orchestra indicates that the storm has subsided. The next scene finds the community mourning Jake, Clara and presumably Crown. Bess has claimed Clara’s baby for her own. David/Sportin’ Life hints that Crown may not actually be dead, and true enough, Crown sneaks back into the community. A fight ensues between Crown and Porgy, who the audience knows has hidden a knife in his leg brace. When Porgy triumphantly stabs Crown and slits his throat some spectators respond with congratulatory applause, but most are too stunned by the emotional content to respond. In the next scene Porgy is confronted by the (non-musically supported) Detectives and taken by them to identify Crown’s body. During Porgy’s absence, David/Sportin’ Life tries to tempt Bess with offers of cocaine. Having been in the PERFORMATIVE action mode for most of the second act there is an uncomfortable shift when the theatrical David/Sportin’ Life attempts a highly ARTISTIC and conventional 11th hour song, “There’s A Boat Leaving Soon.” Although this may be intended as a moment of pure “entertainment” to enjoy the artistry of this actor, it is difficult to separate this from what we believe is his malicious intent toward Bess. Confirming our suspicions, David/Sportin’ Life ends this number with an aggressive grab at Bess which abruptly propels us back into the fictional

world of the play and creates ambiguity in the audience as to whether we should applaud this number or not. Clearly wrapped up again in the fictional and emotional world of the musical, when Bess pulls out the vial of cocaine, which Sportin' Life had left with her, I hear audible murmurs of "no, don't" from spectators near me. The relief of the audience is palpable when Bess pours the vial on the ground and starts to wash it down the drain. Murmurs of, "yes, yes," are heard. Unfortunately as Bess washes the cocaine down the drain, some of it remains on her arm and she can't stop herself from sampling it. Again, audible empathetic responses of "no..." are heard from spectators. Bess leaves to go after David/Sportin' Life. Mariah gives the baby to Serena. Porgy returns, and seeing Serena with the baby realizes Bess is gone. His decision to go after Bess causes him to be shunned by the others, demonstrated in their refusal to make eye-contact with him in the song, "Where's My Bess?" The musical ends with Porgy determined to leave the community to find Bess. His final song, the emotional "I'm on My Way," is a fitting blend of ARTISTIC and PERFORMATIVE action for the end of this musical, indicating the difficult road ahead of him, but also his refusal to give up his optimistic attitude toward life.

Considering how much of the description of the second act has focused on the plot shows where the spectator's attention and focus is for much of the second part of the show. This challenged my expectations going into this musical. I had expected to be dazzled by the ARTISTIC and conventional actions in a sophisticated revisal, not the raw emotion created by empathy from my relationship to the fictional characters and the plot. I was surprised at the intensity of the audience's concentration on the PERFORMATIVE/Representational world of plot and characters. Who said the book musical is dead?

To review, this analysis of a series of actions during the 2012 musical *The Gershwin's Porgy and Bess* showed that while Audra/Bess surprisingly submerges the CELEBRITY of

Macdonald into the fictional construction of Bess, there is a fascination with the materiality of Macdonald's body on stage particularly as it is handled or mishandled by other characters and the vulnerability of its being bathed on stage in front of the spectator. Shared empathy for Audra/Celebrity and Audra/Bess created a deep involvement of the spectators within the fiction of the story and particularly the struggle of Bess with cocaine addiction as noted in audible responses, "No, don't," to her material struggle with a cocaine-like substance on stage.

The Norm/Porgy actions are highly ARTISTIC as expected due to his rich singing voice and skill as a musical theatre actor, but his PERFORMATIVE/Representational actions and the intentional relationship of the other actors to Norm/Porgy as a beloved member of their community transfers quickly to the spectator and places Norm/Porgy most strongly within the fictional world of the musical. A qualitative shift happens when Porgy enters partway through Act One and his presence is significant in bringing the spectator into the fictional world of the musical. Norm/Porgy reaches out to the audience in a WE moment with the song "I've Got Plenty of Nothin." The involvement of the audience in Norm/Porgy's fictional world is demonstrated in the partial and confused audience response with tentative applause at Norm/Porgy's triumphant moment of slitting Crown's throat. The SENSORY/ARTISTIC gesture is recognized, but the concern for what this will mean in the fictional world for Porgy and Bess and the community is held to be of higher importance.

The secondary characters, Nikki/Clara and Joshua/Jake's actions are highly SENSORY and ARTISTIC which make them stand out in the ensemble numbers, particularly the opening scene and the picnic dance. Within the fictional world, Clara and Jake suffer misfortune as do others such as Porgy, Bess and Crown who stand out or separate themselves from the community. We could suggest that in performance, we are made aware of the power of the

norms of the community and a meta-theatrical narrative which conveys that those who stand out, or are different, will be removed from the community.

A surprising discovery is the SENSORY and PERFORMATIVE actions of the props that are handled by the actors. The handling is SENSORY – we note the physical holding of the baby, the actor’s hands on the net, the knife tucked away in Porgy’s brace, the cocaine on Bess’s arm. The juxtaposition of the materiality of the prop and its fictional purpose which frequently results in a causal relationship with the development of the plot, creates an exciting awareness of the “physical” overlapping with the “fictional.” That the prop exists materially in the world of the audience and in the SENSORY world of the actor and has an impact in the fictional world of the play confirms the excitement and contradictions of live theatre.

In summation, *Porgy and Bess* engages on multiple spectator-actor levels. Surprisingly given the recognized artistic achievement of the original version of this musical and the potential celebrity factor of actors Audra McDonald, Norm Lewis and David Alan Grier, the ARTISTIC and CELEBRITY actions while present, are subdued, but enhance the SENSORY and PERFORMATIVE actions. The WE moments are few, but are activated with narrative clues from the orchestra and the song, “I’ve Got Plenty of Nuthin’,” sung by Norm/Porgy in manner that includes the audience in his world.

At the end of the performance the applause for bows is vigorous. A few enthusiastic spectators stand right away, but most of the audience wait to acknowledge MacDonald, Lewis, and Grier with their standing ovation. I interpret this behavior to be more discriminating than the typical immediate standing ovations for most musicals. *Porgy and Bess* ends in a reversal of the musical theatre trope of “the creation of community” with the decision of Norm/Porgy to break from the community to go find Bess. In the final moments of the musical the curved courtyard

set piece raises, revealing the black walls of the backstage and creating an opening to let Norm/Porgy out of the world he has created. It resonates, at least with this spectator, that similarly, after the final bows and when the applause dies down, the doors of the Richard Rodgers Theatre open to spill the audience onto the street, out of the world, it too, has created.

Godspell, Circle in the Square Theatre, New York City
February 4, 2011, 8 pm.

I purchased my ticket for the Broadway revival of *Godspell* in advance using the Playbill online discount. Going to the “official” *Godspell* website I was able to view portions of the show and get a sense of where my seats would be: eight rows from the stage in the middle of a long side of the rectangular stage. The Circle in the Square theatre was set up in an arena stage format. The small rectangular stage in the center, completely open to the spectator’s view upon entrance to the auditorium, held a ladder, some suitcases and trunks and a cutout for an upright piano. Spectators were seated on all four sides with a fairly sharp incline. At least four aisles went from the stage through the audience seating. In very close proximity to the short ends of the stage, spectators were seated on loose cushions. The band members (primarily playing acoustic and electric guitars) were distributed in four areas in the middle of the audience seating. The drum set and drummer were housed in a glass case high above the audience seating on my right. The house was very full with almost every seat filled and was quite noisy with lively conversation before the show. In the midst of this an actor runs on to stage in full lights to start the performance and proclaims:

“I honor and love you,
I shall never cease from the practice of teaching”
Then starts talking into her cell phone.

Other actors enter from arena entrances checking their cell phones. The prologue is sung/spoke with unexpected a cappella backup by the actors. The actors are in modern dress, in a subdued gray-ish palette. They are all young, seemingly of a multiplicity of ethnicities. One of the actors represents the “philosopher” L. Ron Hubbard as indicated by this name on a pizza box. In an overlapping sing/speak section creating onstage “babble” their attention turns to the ladder which they partially raise, and while holding it upright, two actors start to climb. This creates interesting visual tableaux of post-modern confusion and striving. All of this occurs with the house lights still on. In the next moment, however, the actor playing Judas enters through the house singing, “Prepare Ye.” This commands the other actors’ attention and when Wallace/Judas reaches center stage the houselights go down and water starts pouring down from above the stage. A large rectangular trap door in the stage opens revealing more water and the other actors abandon the ladder and are splashily “baptized” by Wallace/Judas with great enthusiasm and pleasure. Water is splashed everywhere. Eventually they run offstage leaving Wallace/Judas behind (to mop up some of the water) and actor Hunter Parrish enters in white boxers and sleeveless undershirt, with the intention of being “baptized” by Wallace/Judas.

All of this has happened in a SENSORY whirl. We are aware of some narrative, created thus far mostly in mime (as the individual lyrics of the prologue were mostly unintelligible) of members of a complex, technological society being offered the opportunity to be cleansed by water to somehow begin anew. This new innocence is made evident in the SENSORY mode, embodied by the nearly stripped down body of Hunter/Jesus. I am aware that the publicity for *Godspell* has made much of the celebrity of Hunter Parrish who has been on the TV show, “Weeds,” and performed in the Broadway production of *Spring Awakening* (2006). His youthful good looks and haircut are also very reminiscent of pop culture celebrity, Justin Bieber.

Although the original production of *Godspell* (nearly forty years earlier) had, unconventionally for the time, portrayed Jesus in a clown/superman costume, in this production Hunter/Jesus puts on simple khaki pants and baseball shirt over his underwear. This theatrical action creates the impression that we are to interpret Jesus more as Hunter/Celebrity than Hunter/Celebrity as Jesus. In contrast to the simple garb of Hunter/Celebrity/Jesus, the rest of the cast returns to the stage in outlandish, colorful costumes partially suggestive of the circus world, but not representational of any time or period. As is customary in a production of *Godspell*, the actors who form the community around Jesus are referred to by their real name and not that of a fictional character. Ironically this creates an unusual relationship with the spectator. We relate to their action throughout the production on mostly a SENSORY or ARTISTIC level because there is no “fictional” character to construct, yet we are also aware that their actions on stage are scripted, and not “real.” This creates a strangely ambiguous relationship because we find it difficult to have empathy with their intentions in the fictional world since what they do onstage has no consequence for that world. What we do find on the SENSORY level is an eagerness for exhibition and an engagement of the audience in many WE moments.

It would not be useful to try to analyze this production through a plot line since *Godspell* makes no attempt to tell the story of Jesus’s life, but instead enacts parables to convey the lessons needed to be learned by the community. These are presented in a whirlwind of variety show style skits, songs, topical references (including Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich), jokes, and mash ups of famous movie lines most of which the audience “gets” and laughs at. A multitude of props including musical instruments, newspapers, confetti shooting cannons and even trampolines are used to create variety and interest. Most of the upbeat songs end with the cast spread around the stage facing the audience and encouraging the spectator to sing or clap

along, which most of them willingly do. The score, which has been updated to a contemporary sound, has neither the authenticity of rock, nor the gently counter-cultural pop rock emphasis of the original.

The WE moments in this production go beyond simple acknowledgement of the spectator in the musical's world to actively pulling spectators onstage to play "pictionary" or "charades" to solve the message of a parable. The spectators seated on the cushions near the stage are directed to flip their cushions over and hold them up to indicate a fiery hell for the "rich man" much as spectators at football games do when they participate in card section. The most fascinating WE moment came at the start of intermission. Hunter/Celebrity/Jesus stood on top of the piano and announced directly to the audience: "Thank you for coming!" The lights came up, but instead of the cast leaving the stage and the music ending to indicate the end of the first act, the band kept on playing and the actors who stayed on stage invited the audience to come up and share some grape juice which was offered in communion-like wine glasses set in the frame of a big metal cross. The stage was instantly flooded by audience members, excited for an opportunity to participate and interact with the cast. This created a new theatrical action not mentioned yet in our model – a SENSORY/exhibitory action for the *spectator*, by this moment of intentionally allowing spectators to be on display for other spectators. In addition it emphasized the liminal world of the actor with the spectator by placing them in an exhibitory position on the same stage. The "intermission" which has been nearly ritualized in theatre as a break for the actors from the audience became a new performance in this liminal world.



Fig. 4: Intermission at *Godspell*

Most of the second act is a similar continuation of the first with jokes, skits, and an extended impression of Oscar winner speeches that are amusing, but seem to come out of nowhere. The parables and goofiness (including an extended section in Chinese and an African sounding language) continue until the action turns more serious with a surprisingly literal and dramatic enactment of the last supper and crucifixion of Jesus. Again, this action engages the spectator on mostly a SENSORY level – we see Hunter/Celebrity/Jesus’s harness under his shirt being hooked up to the cross. He’s flown up in the air, the other actors gather at the foot of the cross. Since we have not been able to empathize with these actors on a PERFORMATIVE level, we have little empathy or intuition for what they are feeling at this point other than a SENSORY

response to their crying. This serious turn is endured only momentarily and then the performance is quickly wrapped up with a spectator/actor clap-along to a reprise of “Prepare Ye.” The indication of bows generates an immediate standing ovation from the enthusiastic audience.

An analysis of the theatrical actions shows that the actors of this revival of *Godspell* are primarily received on a SENSORY and secondarily, ARTISTIC level. Hunter/Jesus utilizes a dominant mode of CELEBRITY and SENSORY to refashion the audience’s expectation of Jesus as Hunter/Celebrity rather than Hunter/Celebrity being submerged in Jesus. It is Hunter/Celebrity who thanks the audience at intermission for their attendance. Within the SENSORY mode we see the intention of the actors to provide an engaging, enjoyable and participatory experience for the audience. The audience responds to what it is directed to do. The use of props and staging is for novelty and doesn’t create any new awareness of the presence of the actors other than their relentless effort to entertain.

This 2011 production of the musical *Godspell* subordinates the spectator’s construction of a fictional world in the attempt to construct a real community including actors and spectators within the performance. The WE moments are substantial as there is never a moment that the spectators don’t feel included in the musical’s world. Spectators are invited to have their own SENSORY/exhibitory performance by joining the actors on the stage. The most memorable moment of this production was the joint performance of the actors and spectators on the stage during intermission. Following the performance spectators are invited to continue their participation with this production by signing up for a lottery to be chosen for a backstage tour after the show.

An earlier discussion in this paper suggested that musicals strive to give audiences some memorable type of experience at a musical theatre performance whether it is involvement in the creation of a fictional world or it is being caught up in the collective, physical energy of live music and theatre within the community of other musical theatre-goers. My experience at these two very different musicals validated these claims. The theatrical actions of the actors in *Porgy and Bess* created with the audience a fictional world that drew the spectator in with empathy for the characters, so much so that audience members felt called to murmur interventional comments like “no” and “yes” at critical points in the musical. In addition to the fictional world, the SENSORY presence of the actors created theatrical excitement. The combination of celebrity and intense physicality of the leading actor, Audra MacDonald, reminded me of a similar type of physical performance by the actor Johnny Gallagher, Jr. in the musical *American Idiot* (2010) where Gallagher energetically propelled his body all over the set, at one point doing a complete flip. In addition, Gallagher accompanied his own singing on guitar. This intense physical presence of the actors relates to the sense of what director John Doyle described in an earlier chapter, “We’re telling you this story. We’re not pretending. We’re all in the same place at the same time” (qtd. in Pender 48).

The revival of *Godspell* emphasized creation of WE moments and community. Its adaptation of the ritual of intermission into a performance opportunity for the spectator suggests “liminoid” behavior. That this form of performance art, so attractive for discussion among theorists starting from the 1980s who, as Marvin Carlson notes in *Theories of the Theatre* (1984), became “interested in the similar concepts of ‘Carnivalization,’ discussed in Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*” (1984:509) appears in a Broadway musical provides another reason to suggest why the musical theatre genre is worthy of critical examination. This production of

Godspell creates blurred boundaries of performance and reality for the actor. It is an example of what theorist Josette Feral in her essay “Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Dymystified” (1982), considers as “the actor neither ‘plays’ nor ‘represents’ himself but is a source of ‘production and displacement.’” He becomes “the point of passage for energy flows – gestural, vocal, libidinal, etc. – that traverse him without ever standing still in a fixed meaning or representation” (qtd. in Carlson 511). Although the theoretical discourse sited around differences between theatricality and performance is fascinatingly too large to entertain in discussion here, I think that this performance of *Godspell* demonstrates a liminality between those two worlds. Perhaps we can hold this musical theatre production up as a reason to hope against the statement of theorist Michael Fried who claimed, “The success, even the survival of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre” (qtd. in Carlson 1984:511).

Chapter VI

Conclusion

In the book *How Not to Write a Play* (1955), by theatre critic and playwright Walter Kerr, Kerr laments the slow pace and banality of mid 20th century American theatre, mired in realism. After discussing how the theatre needs to return to action driven characters and plots, lyricism in dialogue, and more adventurous theatricality, Kerr writes:

We might pause for a moment over musical comedy, though. It is interesting to note that, of all the forms of our time, musical comedy is the only one to make use of: free unrealistic backgrounds; rapid leaps through time and space; bold color; heightened language (in its lyrics); rhythm (in its music); dynamic movement (not only in its dance, but everywhere); direct address to the audience. Musical comedy is the form that makes the most extensive use of theatrical conventions and its theatrical vitality must stem from that fact. The form is eager to please its audiences, and to explore the theater as theater – two things that the serious drama has not thought of doing in quite a long while. We generally regard the popularity of musicals as a sign of public illiteracy; it may actually be a response to creative joy. (237)

This is quite an endorsement for a genre that usually doesn't get much respect; unfortunately a sentence later Kerr adds snidely: "However, musical comedy is musical comedy, and we've been talking about the legitimate stage" (237). As was discussed in the introduction to this paper, Kerr is not alone in his view of dismissing the popular form of musical theatre from valid critical regard. In her article, "Theatre/Tourism" (2005), Susan Bennett challenges theatre and performance scholars to broaden discursive horizons to include commercially successful productions such as musical theatre. She asks, "When is a play not a play? When it is a financial phenomenon. [. . .] To understand the production-reception contract in our own historico-global moment, we can no longer simply neglect those theatrical products we and so many others pay top dollar to see" (2005:428). Much of this paper has included my effort to

take up this challenge presented by Bennett and to defend musical theatre as a genre against critics like Kerr. If this is an outgrowth of my own passion for musical theatre then I claim allegiance with a scholar on the order of Jill Dolan, who writes in *Utopia In Performance*:

[T]heater and performance scholars speak too rarely about how theater moves us and inspires us in our public and private worlds. Performance scholar David Román says, “the fear that our love of theatre will call into question our critical capacities follows from our field’s efforts to credentialize itself against the charge of inconsequentiality. [. . .] We are bullied into keeping our love of theatre outside of our scholarship.” (qtd. in Dolan 2005:65)

This paper has focused on an interrogation of musical theatre practices and the experience of live musical theatre performances to find intersections with current concerns of theatre theorists regarding the role of the spectator, theatre as the creation of community and theatrical play. A review of theories of spectator reception, including reader response, semiotics, phenomenology, the theatrical event and cognitive spectating indicated a special interest regarding the actor-spectator relationship and the discussion of that relationship within the context of the live musical theatre performance has dominated this work. That several of these theories include references to historical thought relevant to their contemporary interests, such as Bruce McConachie citing the philosopher Horace in a discussion of the double consciousness of theatre, Erika Fischer-Lichte referencing historical opinions regarding emotional contagion, and Julia Walker continuing a discussion of the controversy around privileging text over performance (which has gone on for many years) shows that the struggle to understand theatre through the lenses of these theories, regardless of genre, has occurred for a long time. The recent outpouring of scholarly texts on these subjects, such as *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance and Philosophy* (2006), *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating* (2008), *Theatrical Events: Borders, Dynamics, Frames* (2004), *Critical Theory and*

Performance (2007), and *Utopia in Performance* (2005), for example, show that scholars are still wrestling with concepts of how meaning is derived and how spectators understand theatre.

To apply some of these concepts to musical theatre performance, I began with a discussion of the goals that musical theatre has for its audience and the unique role that the audience plays in the creation of musicals as an active collaborator. Musical theatre attempts to please its audience and through this also achieves commercial success. In the development of a new musical, directors and the creative team test their work in front of a live audience. In many cases the creators try to do a phenomenological “reading” of the audience during performance to get a sense of what “works.” The audience acts as both a collective – a community created by the event – (as Herbert Blau suggests) and as individual spectators who participate in active viewing. These active cognitive elements of viewing include attention, memory, visual perception, empathy, conceptual blending and the imaginative concept of play. Through the action of empathy, emotional contagion spreads among spectators and in some instances I suggested that audiences may “vibrate” in tune with the production. Theorists such as Willmar Sauter and Peter Eversmann suggest that audiences want to have fun and theorize theatre as a form of “play” with actor and spectator having equal agency. This idea of “play” and the joy that can be found in performance resonates with the utopian performative “*communitas*” (discussed by Jill Dolan) and the transformational liminal spaces (described by Erika Fischer-Lichte) which are created through the formation of community around the actor-spectator relationship. It also is compatible with the claims of musical theatre productions which seek to provide a memorable experience of community within the energy of the theatrical event created by musicals. I discussed the example from the musical, *A Chorus Line* which made changes to

its ending during the workshop process based on the collective empathy from the audience toward a few of its characters.

In the next chapter we turned to information from one of the few theatre empirical studies which attempts to capture a spectator's experience during performance, the "Theatre Talks" survey created by Willmar Sauter. This study found that the most important element in performance for generating audience interest is the dynamic of the actor in relationship to the spectator. This was used as a point of departure to discuss the various modes of the actor-spectator relationship developed within cognitive approaches to spectating, phenomenology theories of theatre, the theatrical event approach, and the semiotic approach. In looking at the intersections of these theories with musical theatre examples I identified key elements that relate to the actor-spectator relationship modes in musical theatre and developed these specific modes:

SENSORY/Exhibitory (the actor's physical presence)

ARTISTIC/Expressive (the actor's skill)

WE/Community (including the spectator in the world of the musical)

PERFORMATIVE/Representational (the mutual work of creating the fictional character between the actor and spectator)

CELEBRITY (additional over-layers of fictional narrative from the actor, herself)

Rather than finding these modes of communication operating serially in performance, it was noted how a dynamic oscillation between modes during performance increases the spectator's interest. In musical theatre many of these modes overlap in the moment of performance which creates a rich, memorable and multi-layered relationship between actor and spectator. The question remained as to whether these modes could be analyzed within the

moment of performance and if so, what could that tell us about the spectator's relationship with the actor, the fictional world of the musical, and the experience of the performance itself?

Taking first an historical approach to applying the actor-spectator relationship model developed for musical theatre, in Chapter IV we examined an historical musical theatre event: the Boston out-of-town reception of the musical, *Oklahoma!* I discussed the staging, performance and reception of the title song which is known to have been instrumental for the ultimate success of *Oklahoma!* Without straying into a cultural reading of the musical, my goal was to examine, with historical input, what was going on between the stage and spectator and to focus on the "eventness" and phenomenological impact. Citing the work of Willmar Sauter, this approach is an attempt to examine the "fish" and not the "fishbowl." This type of historical approach, focusing on the cognitive engagement of the audience and not the cultural or material history of the production is one of the methods suggested for further consideration and development for theatre historians by Bruce McConachie in the Epilogue in *Engaging Spectators* (2008: 185). It was interesting to discover that as a new form of musical -- an integrated musical -- the actor-spectator actions in *Oklahoma!* showed a shift in dominance from ARTISTIC/encoded actions to a high level of PERFORMATIVE/Representational actions due to an emphasis on strong acting skills for the actor/singer/chorus, an intentional lack of CELEBRITY and a directorial style that prompted the actors' communication to focus on each other rather than out to the audiences. Even the songs are performed in the PERFORMATIVE/Representational mode to advance the story of the musical. The SENSORY and ARTISTIC actions are subdued to the primary task of creating the fictional world and characters. I found that with the song "Oklahoma!" a moment is created where the SENSORY and the WE are allowed to burst through. Through this fusion a density of "blends" is achieved

which contributes to elevating the communicative power between actor and spectator to the physical creation of community. Although other attempts at innovative staging had been tried (including the use of pigeons) it was this emphasis on the SENSORY and WE interaction between actors and spectators, the shared physical presence of bodies in the space, that successfully created the theatrical excitement that was needed.

Next, the musical theatre actor-spectator model was applied to two live musical theatre performances: The *Gershwin's Porgy and Bess* and the revival of the musical *Godspell*. I was interested to find out if there would be significant moments from these modes that would last in my memory or moments of communication that exist only in performance and not in the script. Other questions that were considered were: how do WE moments occur and what happens when attention is placed on the materiality of the actors' bodies? My analysis included only that which was experienced in the live performance and not information from the "text" or libretto of the musicals.

It was not surprising to find that the actions in *Porgy and Bess* engaged on multiple spectator-actor levels. What was interesting, however, was that given the celebrity of its star, Audra MacDonald, and other lead actors, the ARTISTIC and CELEBRITY actions while present, were subdued, but enhanced the SENSORY and PERFORMATIVE actions. The audience, as a body, was very wrapped up in the fictional world of the play, so much so as to neglect to applaud at the end of a few songs. The WE moments were few, but were activated with narrative clues from the orchestra and the song "I've Got Plenty of Nuthin'," which was sung by Norm/Porgy in manner that invited the audience into his world. The materiality of the actors' bodies and real props, especially the memorable scene where Audra MacDonald, as Bess,

is bathed on stage with real water, created an exciting awareness of the “physical” overlapping with the “fictional” in this theatrical performance.

My analysis of the theatrical actions of the revival of *Godspell* showed that the actors of *Godspell* are primarily received on a SENSORY and secondarily, ARTISTIC level. The actor playing Jesus, Hunter Parrish, utilizes a dominant mode of CELEBRITY and SENSORY to refashion the audience’s expectation of Jesus as Hunter/Celebrity rather than Hunter/Celebrity being submerged in Jesus. Within the SENSORY mode we see the intention of the actors to provide an engaging, enjoyable and participatory experience for the audience. The audience responds to what it is directed to do. The use of props and staging is for novelty and doesn’t create any new awareness of the presence of the actors other than their desire to entertain and attract our attention. The WE moments are substantial as there is never a moment that the spectators don’t feel included in the musical’s world. The most memorable and fascinating part of this performance was the joint performance of the actors and spectators on the stage during intermission where the spectators were invited to have their own SENSORY/exhibitory performance by joining the actors on the stage. This could be described as “liminoid” behavior by some theatre theorists.

Having spent much of this thesis looking at musical theatre as a subject for spectator reception theory and other current trends in theatre theory, where do I now place musical theatre in critical discourse?

Musical theatre performances represent an extra ordinary blend of actor – spectator modes. Given the complexity of musical theatre productions with the integration of singing, dancing, and often complex staging, it is surprising to return to the importance of the physical presence of the actor as a focus for the spectator. As noted in the analysis of *Porgy and Bess*, the

spectator is aware of the physical nature of the actors' heavy breathing following a vigorous dance number, their material interaction with props, and the vulnerability of the actor's body when handled by other characters. In the revival of *Godspell*, the character of Jesus is dominated by the physical qualities and celebrity of actor Hunter Parrish. In a recent discussion of *Godspell* on *The Today Show*, host Kathie Lee Gifford commented on the number of youthful audience members who were enjoying the performance of *Godspell* the night she attended the show. Speaking to some of them directly after the performance, Gifford reported that their favorite part of the production was: "Jesus. He is so hot" (*The Today Show* 09 March 2012). It would be interesting in future studies to investigate what changes or additions we would need to make to the actor-spectator model developed for musical theatre in light of the increasing intertwining of live musical theatre performance with mediatization. The New York Philharmonic's concert version (2011) of Stephen Sondheim and George Furth's *Company* which was recently presented in movie theatres across the nation is an example of this intertwining. We could also consider the innovative use of television as a form of out-of-town tryout for the musical about Marilyn Monroe developed within the new TV series, "Smash." If the television market shows sufficient interest, the producers of this intend to mount a Broadway production of the musical created within the show. How will spectators, who are used to seeing the mediatized "behind the scenes" version of this musical relate to it in live performance?

Musicals are skillful at creating a bond of community between the auditorium and the stage, because their intention is to provide a pleasurable or memorable experience for the audience. This is not to suggest that musicals don't challenge audiences with subject matter or innovation. Instead, musical theatre practitioners are clever at using the form to reassure audiences that they will have a good time, even when introducing new subject matter. In his

book, *Mainly on Directing* (2009), director and playwright Arthur Laurents states, “The purpose of the first minutes of any musical is not to challenge the audience but to hook it so firmly it will stay hooked for half the first act. Then you can challenge away” (124). In trying to figure out how to make the song “I Am What I Am” in the musical *La Cage Aux Folles* (1989) work, Laurents had to figure out how to make the whole show work. He knew he had succeeded when he found that, “The Cagelles [male chorus] in the opening number looked out and saw men burying their faces in their programs rather than look at other men in drag. At the end of the show, the Cagelles saw the same men on their feet applauding them” (141). So much has been written on the form and content of musical theatre, that it hasn’t been discussed here, but my point is to show that musicals know that their value is found through creating a response from the audience borne of emotional contagion or a sense of joy and community. I would suggest that this intention and ability of musical theatre to just create this mutual “feeling” response from its spectators is, perhaps, ahead of the curve in contemporary theatre theory. In *Utopia in Performance* (2005) Dolan suggests:

Perhaps our goal shouldn’t be to formulate or implement how utopian performatives can have social effect outside the theater, but should be to focus our activism on getting more and different kinds of people into the theater in the first place, so that they too, might experience their affective power. We too often flounder on the shoals of “what does this *do*,” when how something *feels* in the moment might be powerful enough. (2005:170 author’s emphasis)

Some have suggested that musicals as escapist entertainment create visions of “utopia.” In his book *Only Entertainment* (1992), theorist Richard Dyer, challenges the notion of the creation of a utopian world with his statement of what he thinks the audience really wants – the experience it embodies:

Entertainment does not, however, present models of utopian worlds, as in the classic utopias of Thomas More, William Morris, et al. Rather the utopianism is contained in the

feelings it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. (20)

As musicals become increasingly part of the “tourist” market in New York City, it would be interesting to investigate whether this feeling of *utopia* or *communitas* crosses language borders. We mentioned earlier that we “take it for granted that spectators will usually pay attention to what is happening on the stage, that they will be able to understand the sounds coming out of the actors’ mouth as intelligible communication” (McConachie 2008:23). What happens in the actor-spectator relationship when spectators don’t understand the language? Does the emotional contagion from other spectators or the actor-spectator relationship through the SENSORY mode envelope these spectators in the sense of community as well?

We have discussed how the audience has a role in the collaborative creation of a musical, but additionally the spectator plays an important role in the “event” of musical theatre performance. Like other live performances, musicals need an audience. As an “event,” a musical theatre performance is mutually created by the shared agency of the actor and spectator. In its WE moments, musicals clearly value the spectator by acknowledging the audience in the world of the play. In the above quotation, Dolan mentions the “affective power” of the spectator and that occurs in musical theatre when spectators share in the mutual work of creating a fictional world, which was so evident in the musical *Porgy and Bess*, and in the celebration of community as was found in the revival of *Godspell*. Could an investigation of musical theatre “flops” determine that the failure was due to an incompleteness or void in the actor-spectator relationship? Can creators of musical theatre learn from the actor-spectator model developed in this thesis and the insight developed that it is the multiplicity of blends and relationships between the actor and spectator that enhances their mutual work in the performance and ultimately creates a rewarding and memorable musical theatre experience?

Musical theatre, though expensive, complex and seeking commercial viability can still be located in the basic ritual of theatre – the transubstantiation of its elements through the co-agency of its celebrants (actor and spectator) into something new, possibly powerful, and yet fleeting. Musical theatre presents an opportunity for intimacy between the actor and spectator. I will end this discussion with a quotation from phenomenologist Bert O. States which sums up the value of theatre, in which I believe that musical theatre may be firmly included:

Thus one witnesses a play as an event in the real world as well as an illusion of an unreal world, and its realism is not simply the descriptive realism of either cinema or fiction but the weakly disguised reality of the actor and the raised platform on which he stands. The intimacy of theater is not the intimacy of being within its world but of being present at its world's origination under all the constraints, visible and invisible, of immediate actuality. (154)

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